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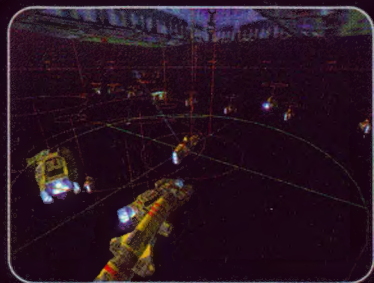
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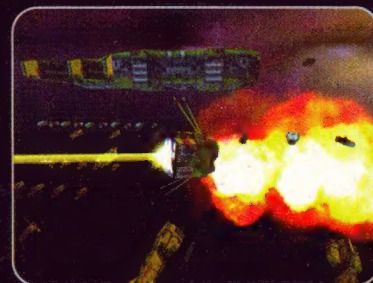
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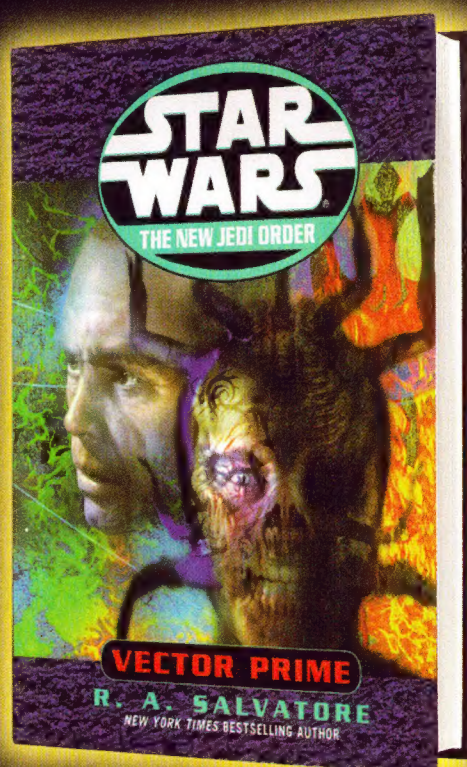
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AMAZING[®] STORIES



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NUMBER 598

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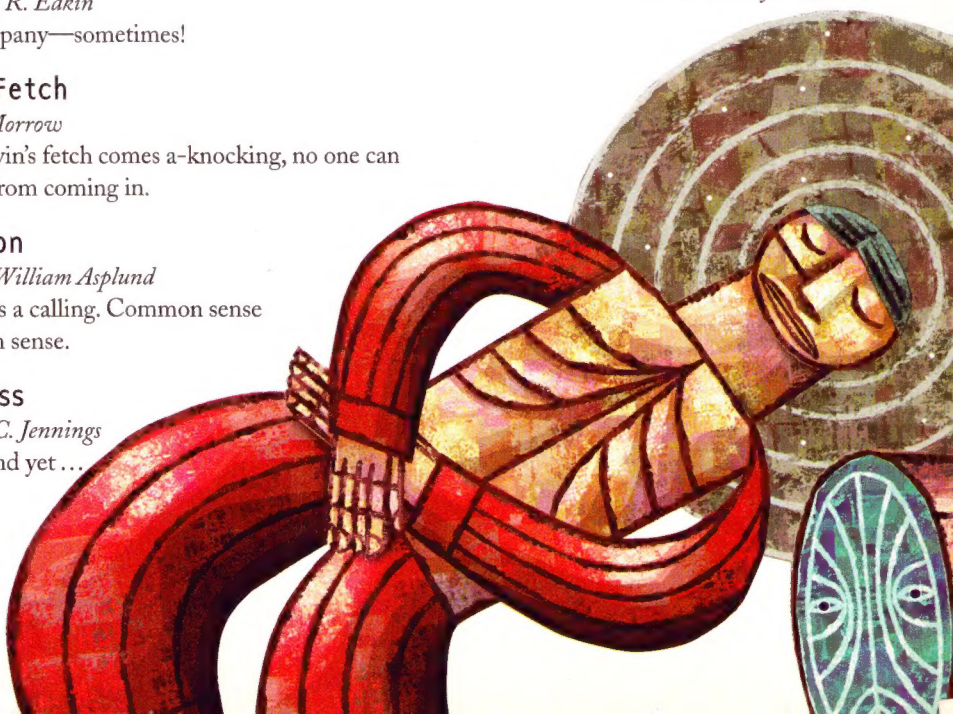
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Long before he encountered the Bride of Chaotica on your television screens, Captain Proton, of the Interstellar Patrol, and his faithful secretary, Constance Goodheart, traveled the galaxy stamping out evil.



Turn to page 16 for Captain Proton's earliest adventure ever published.





From the Editor

A Tale of Two Masters

IDON'T BELIEVE in using this space to talk about the stories you're about to read, because the stories speak for themselves. But I'm bending my rule this time around, so I can tell you about two special people whose writing fills some of these pages.

James Morrow has it all—creativity, craftsmanship, and the courage to tackle topics that a lot of other writers shy away from. Not many people could write a novel about the dead body of God floating in the Atlantic Ocean and pull it off masterfully. Back in 1993, Jim asked me if I wanted to serialize his new novel, *Towing Jehovah*, before it was published in book form. I knew a brilliant story when I saw it, and I jumped at the chance to get it into *AMAZING® Stories* . . . but then the magazine changed format and publishing frequency, making it impossible for me to follow through.

Towing Jehovah went on to win the 1994 World Fantasy Award for best novel. When I heard the news, I was happy for Jim . . . mostly. A part of me, though, lamented the fact that *AMAZING* didn't get its opportunity to introduce the book to the world.

Some part of Jim must have felt the same way, because when he was finishing his follow-up novel, *The Eternal Footman*, he got in touch to see if I wanted to serialize this book. I had to say no, because we aren't publishing often enough to use a three- or four-part serial, but I wondered if he could identify a piece of the book we could present as an excerpt.

So he sent me an excerpt, and I didn't like it because it was too long. He shortened it, and then I didn't like it because it didn't seem to be enough of a story on its own. (Editors. Go figure.) So he sent me an excerpt that's an actual story. The tale of "Kevin's Fetch" is composed of a number of pieces taken from different spots in the book. Compiling this narrative was work that Jim Morrow didn't have to do, work that didn't increase the amount of money he got paid. I don't know for sure that Jim was concerned about giving something back to this magazine to make up for what happened with *Towing Jehovah*, but I can't think of any other reason why he would have tried so hard to make this work.

ANYTHING I COULD SAY about the career of Frederik Pohl would be going over ground that has already been covered by fans and critics during the last several decades—except for one fact that I suppose some of you don't know: *AMAZING Stories* was the first professional magazine to publish his work. That piece is a poem titled "Elegy to a Dead Satellite: Luna." It appeared in the October 1937 issue of this magazine under the pseudonym Elton V. Andrews.

On that basis, I'm going to consider the publication of "Hatching the Phoenix" in this issue as our way of celebrating Fred Pohl's 62nd anniversary as a published writer. It's not a nice round number, as most anniversary numbers tend to be, but it is a *big* number, and one that deserves not to be overlooked.

A few months ago, when we were corresponding on a different subject, Fred mentioned in a by-the-way fashion that he was working on a new Heechee story, and he wondered if I'd like to take a look at it. You can imagine how the rest of the story goes. . . . If you're not familiar with the Heechee, do yourself a favor and buy this magazine. Then seek out a copy of *Gateway*, and be prepared to set aside more of your book-buying budget for the other novels in the series. This is science fiction in the grand tradition, as only a grand master can write it.

TO JIM AND FRED, I offer my gratitude. To you, I offer their work. When you're done reading it, you'll be grateful, too.

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Dispatches

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A Satisfied Reader

Dear *AMAZING Stories*,

It has been a while since I picked up a science fiction magazine. In the past I had subscribed and been an avid reader of such magazines, but in time my interest in short stories had faded. Recently a friend reintroduced me to the genre with a copy of your magazine.

Seeing your *Starcraft* cover story, I was very interested. I am a regular player of *Starcraft* and a fan of the setting. I really enjoyed "Revelations." Playing the game and experiencing the story line only gives you one view of the world. Reading "Revelations," I experienced things that fit the setting well, but don't work in the game mechanics. For example, the wounding and infection of Madrid made perfect sense in the story, but would not have fit within the gameplay.

I also enjoyed the piece by Bill Slavicsek on *Star Wars*. As a longtime fan of *Star Wars*, his thoughts on the anticipation and expectation of *The Phantom Menace* were similar to my own. I would be interested in reading his reaction to the finished work.

Finally, keep the look and feel going. The classic covers and artwork add a nice touch, reminding me of where science fiction came from, and the more modern pieces make a nice contrast, indicating where the genre is and where it is going.

DAN WOODWARD
Muskego, WI

In response, *AMAZING Stories* author Bill Slavicsek provides us with his reaction to *Star Wars: Episode I, The Phantom Menace*:

I thought the movie was fun, exciting, visually stunning, and beautiful to behold. I approached the film with a mixture of childlike anticipation and grown-up dread. Part of me couldn't wait to once again be transported to that far-away, long-ago galaxy. Another part of me was nervous. I knew the new film couldn't possibly match the movie I had been imagining all these years. That part just kept repeating, "Please don't screw it up,

George." He didn't. He made a new *Star Wars* movie, and it was a good *Star Wars* movie.

The look of the movie, the aliens, and the new locations were amazing. The light-saber battles were thrilling, and the Jedi Knights were just so cool. (Two! They sent just two Jedi Knights to resolve the conflict!) I thought Queen Amidala was a strong, intriguing character. The droids were wonderful. Darth Maul looked so evil. And Palpatine was just as manipulative and scheming as I imagined he would be.

I thought George did a good job with continuity and made this feel like part of the world he created twenty-two years ago.

However, my biggest complaint is that it felt like a setup story. It didn't have the pacing or dramatic tension of any of the films in the original trilogy, nor did it have a cliff-hanger ending like *The Empire Strikes Back* to account for the setup. I never felt that Naboo or the Gungans were in terrible danger, not like when the Death Star was zeroing in on Yavin Four or the second Death Star was decimating the Rebel fleet while the Emperor tried to turn Luke to the dark side or kill him with force lightning.

While *The Phantom Menace* might not be the best of the *Star Wars* films, it is definitely a worthy successor to the *Star Wars* legacy. And it was a fun film. I've seen it three times so far, and I'm sure I'll see it a few times more before the summer comes to an end.

Now I'm eagerly anticipating *Episode Two*. I'm ready for the next movie to pick up on the promises made in *Episode One* and carry them to the next level of story development.



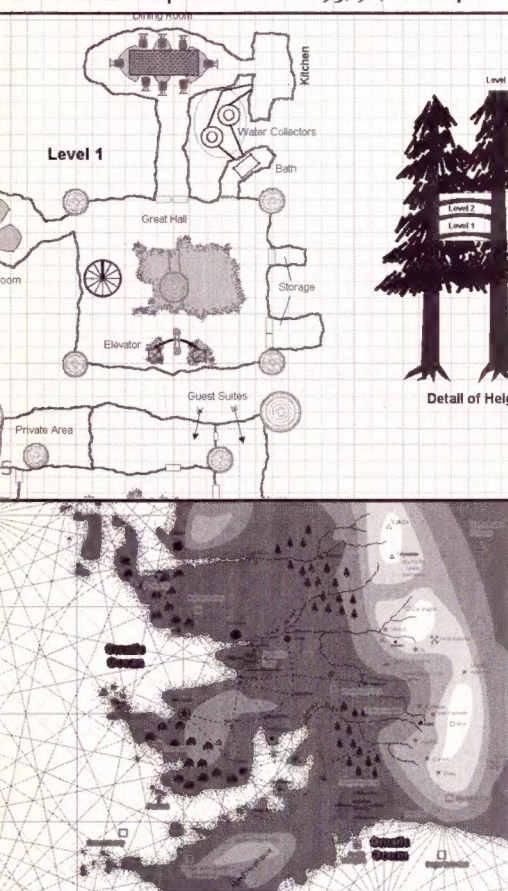
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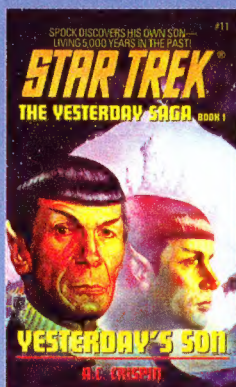
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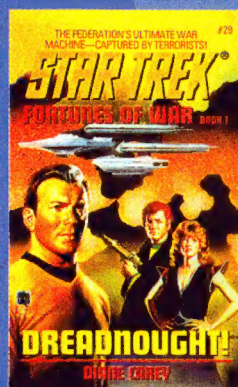
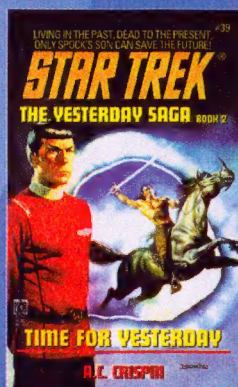
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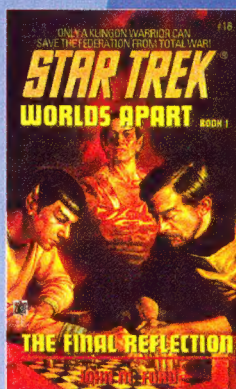
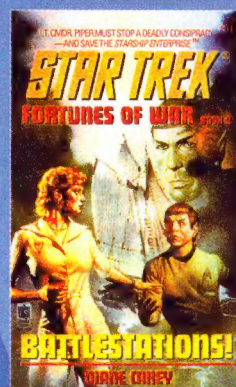
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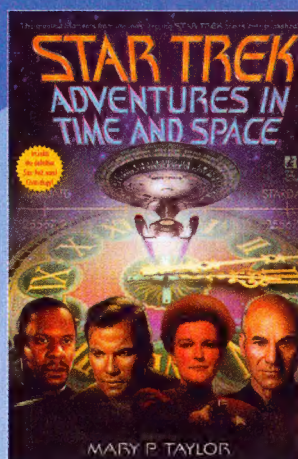
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The "Death" of Science Fiction?

ALL THEM WHATEVER YOU WANT—purists, or elitists, or just plain snobs. Does science fiction really need genre police?

These days I rarely attend a convention without finding "Is *Star Trek*/*Star Wars* Killing Science Fiction?" on the list of panels. I've heard people dismiss the entire output of a particular author with disdain. "Oh, once a writer starts doing *media books* (shudder), he never does good work again."

January 1956

At exactly the time Derke Berish realized he was about to lose everything, a small boy showed the sure way to save it. All you had to do, it seemed, was to find a hole in the air, climb through and help yourself to fame and fortune. Worked fine too . . . until Derke found out that he wasn't the only one fond of fame and fortune!

Editor's introduction to "Hole in the Air" by Robert Silverberg



Over the years, these vehement "elitist" fans have fabricated and perpetuated numerous myths and made doom-filled pronouncements . . . without troubling to back them up with facts. They're like blindfolded Chicken Littles running around proclaiming the end of the world without bothering to look at the sky.

Since I have written numerous media-based books as well as critically acclaimed original novels, let me give you some real numbers and real examples.

MYTH No. 1

Media tie-in fans never read other books.

The quaint way of responding to this is: "Pure bunk!"

Refusing to see the crossover audience is like sticking your head in the sand. I have received hundreds of letters from fans who sought out my other titles after being introduced to my work through tie-in novels. With the incentive of *Star Wars* and *X-Files*, I have attracted a huge number of readers who would never otherwise have picked up my original books.

Of course, not *all* tie-in readers cross over. Some of them will read media books and never look elsewhere. (There, I'd make the argument that without tie-ins, these people probably wouldn't be reading at all, but would be playing computer games or wandering malls. Personally, I'd rather

they were reading.) However, even a small percentage of a *very large pool* of book buyers can have a significant effect. One percent of a million readers is enough to practically double the average midlist paperback print run.

I can look at my own "before and after" royalty statements. The advances, printings, and sales figures for my other novels have increased dramatically since I started writing media books. Putting "*New York Times* Bestselling Author" on the cover certainly helps to generate attention.

Media tie-in properties generate not just sales in the U.S., but worldwide attention. My *X-Files* and *Star Wars* work has gotten my original novels noticed in places that had never shown any interest before. As a specific example, my British *X-Files* publisher recently released three of my best SF novels, solely on the basis of my *X-Files* success in the U.K.; before that, no British publisher had expressed any interest in my backlist, despite my years of trying.

My German publisher of *Star Wars* and *X-Files* has now translated seven of my original works and has released them with significant fanfare—in hardcover—to ride the coattails of my media best-sellers. According to one of their financial officers, putting "*X-Files* author!" on the cover of my original books doubles the sales. Same goes for my Polish editions, Italian, Japanese, Hebrew, and others. None of these sales would have happened without my tie-in popularity.

No crossover audience? Yeah, and the Earth is flat.

MYTH No. 2

Media fans are tainted; they're not "real" readers.

Among the examples most often scorned are novels based on comic book characters (Spider-man, the X-Men, and so forth). But take a moment to think where these readers are coming from—they are comic-book buyers who have been lured into reading novels. An obvious next step for them is to try the Wild Cards books, and then perhaps *Ender's Game*. Voila! A new reader is born. Without the incentive, they may never have picked up a paperback novel at all. Some of these fans eventually may go on to pick up *Dhalgren* . . . but that's certainly not the best place for a new reader to start!

At one book signing, a mother introduced me to her dyslexic eight-year-old son. He had spent three years in special education classes, but no one could teach him how to read. He was way behind in school. One day, he saw my first *Star Wars* novel and made up his mind that he *wanted* to read it. He taught himself to read using my 354-page adult novel—the first book he ever read—and

May 1971

The nature of reality is that it is fixed, immutable. But one man on earth had the power to change reality through his dreams—and now those dreams were turning into nightmares.

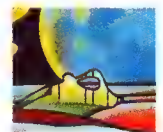
Editor's introduction to
"The Lathe of Heaven"
by Ursula K. Le Guin



September
1945

Say, for instance, that Venus DID send us an ambassador? How would our state department accept him? Or would they?

Editor's introduction to
"The Voice from Venus"
by Don Wilcox



September
1945

It was a strange beauty parlor where these ugly gnomes went to become handsome men!

Editor's introduction to
"Cursed Cavern of Ra"
by Lee Francis



By introducing readers to the adventures of characters they already know and love, we can show them that books are *fun*, that reading doesn't have to be boring.

now his mother says he is a voracious reader and she can't give him new titles fast enough.

We have received boxes of letters from young fans saying the same thing, over and over—"I never liked to read until I read your books." (We all know what books our teachers made us slog through, as if to emphasize that stories must be dull.) By introducing readers to the adventures of characters they already know and love, we can show them that books are *fun*, that reading doesn't have to be boring. Once they learn to love stories, the entire science fiction section awaits.

If they venture bright-eyed into the field and encounter only a wall of snobs, they'll go someplace else.

MYTH No.3

Authors just knock off media books for the money. They can't do anything creatively satisfying with someone else's characters.

The elitists fail to consider that an author might actually *enjoy* writing tie-in novels. Personally, I love *Star Wars* and *The X-Files*. I also enjoy writing original fiction—and so I do both. A good author can find room to tell an interesting, original story even in a preestablished universe.

Authors are bound by constraints in every story they write. For instance, if I'm going to write a novel like *Shogun*, I would read historical books about Japan, look at photographs of the land-

scape, familiarize myself with the artwork, historical figures, and political climate of the period.

After I've done enough research that I have a clear picture of "ancient Japan" in my head, then I can begin writing my story.

Similarly, if I am going to write a *Star Wars* novel, I study the films carefully, note the details of the settings, read the auxiliary materials (guidebooks, story bibles, ship blueprints, etc.). After I've done enough research that I have a clear picture of the "*Star Wars* universe" in my head—planets, the political setting, the nature of the overall conflict—then I can begin writing my story. After that, it's up to my imagination.

One time when I was sweating over a *Star Wars* deadline, polishing and polishing a manuscript, a writer friend asked me, in all seriousness, "Why are you working so hard on that? Nobody'll notice the difference." He was shocked to learn that I put as much effort into my media novels as I do into my original fiction. From the outset, I know the tie-in books are going to sell in big numbers—how can I possibly allow myself to do a bad job? If I do sloppy work in a reader's favorite universe, how can I ever expect that reader to try my own novels?

Besides, writing books for "cultural icons" leaves some BIG SHOES to fill. These are some of the most beloved stories of all time, and I'm certainly not going to muck them up. The fans watch every word, and tie-in writers who blow off their responsibility are just shooting themselves in the foot.

MYTH No. 4

*Once an author does media work,
we've lost him or her forever.*

September 1945

The crater looked as though
it had been made by a
meteorite—but who ever
saw a square meteorite?
And then it opened . . .

*Editor's introduction to
"Mysterious Crater"
by LeRoy Yerxa*



January 1942

These people, ready to die,
rose from their hospital
beds and vanished. Where
did they go? For what pur-
pose were the sick and
dying kidnapped?

*Editor's introduction to
"Planet of Doomed Men"
by Robert Moore Williams*



April 1942

America was invaded, and
only Adam Link knew their
identity—invaders more
terrible than Hitler!

*Editor's introduction to
"Adam Link Saves the World"
by Eando Binder*

Or is it maybe that the purists put on blinders and stop noticing an author once he or she has deigned to do media work?

Kristine Kathryn Rusch has written media books—a lot of them. She was also editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, was nominated for the Nebula and Bram Stoker awards, and won the Hugo Award and the World Fantasy Award. Did writing tie-in work adversely affect her creative ability? I don't think so.

In the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, the listing for Isaac Asimov bears the curious statement "A film tie, *FANTASTIC VOYAGE* (1966) . . . did his name no good." It seems an odd thing to say, considering this was Asimov's best-selling title in his entire career. The copy on my shelf is from the fifty-first printing. I remember reading and enjoying that novel when I was much younger; it was always checked out of the library, and many of my friends also talked about it. From there I went on to read Asimov's other books. "Did his name no good"? I beg to differ.

Every year since I started publishing media books, I have made it a point to produce at least one "Damn the sales figures, I want to write this!" novel. Since the time my first media work appeared, I have also written *Climbing Olympus* (voted best paperback SF novel of the year in *Locus*, also a preliminary Nebula nominee) and *Blindfold* (a preliminary Nebula nominee). *Assemblers of Infinity*, one of my novels with Doug Beason, was a final Nebula nominee, and two of our other books, *Ill Wind* and *Ignition*, were optioned to Hollywood as major films. All told, I published nine original novels in five years.

If that's "losing me forever," I don't want to be found.

MYTH No. 5

*With so many media books published,
there's no room on bookstore shelves for
"real" science fiction.*

This is easy to disprove with hard facts and figures. The argument assumes that all SF shelf space is a constant, which is patently ridiculous. Because media tie-in books sell so well, many bookstores have dramatically expanded the size of their entire SF sections. Science fiction no longer lives on a small rack in the back of the store, but covers whole walls. Sure, there are a lot of *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* books on the shelves . . . but there are also a lot more shelves!

Recent statistics from the Association of American Publishers show that all book sales jumped 7.9 percent last year. The increase was 10.8 percent in adult fiction and 20 percent in children's paperbacks (i.e., new readers). Even confined to our own genre, using the numbers published in the latest *Locus* year-end summary, media fiction is indeed up—but so is adult SF. So is fantasy. So is horror. And anthologies, and collections—in fact, every single category is up.

The "death" of science fiction? I don't think so.

The fact is, through media tie-in novels, we are expanding our base and attracting new fans. Anyone interested in the health of our genre should cheer *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Babylon 5*, *X-Files*, or anything else that brings in new readers from the outside.

I'm not saying that you should read media tie-ins, or swords and sorcery, or SF romance, or humorous fantasy. Read what you want to—but don't knock what somebody else wants to read.

Right now there is more science fiction on TV than a person can watch. Every year the biggest blockbuster films are science fiction. Remember when SF was just for geeks? Remember when we fought for any sort of notice or respectability? Judging by their words and actions, one might think the hard-core elitists want to go back to the ghetto.

"Are *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* killing science fiction?"

NO! They are science fiction. This is a battle we have already won. The audience is growing, and the field now has more diversity, more choices. Some readers will like media spin-offs, some will like hard SF, or fat fantasy series, or space operas. . . . But they're all buying books, and they're all reading science fiction.

It's time to stop complaining about success. 🍷

about the author



Kevin J. Anderson knew he wanted to create fiction when he was five years old. The day after seeing the classic movie War of the Worlds on television, he drew pictures of scenes from the movie, spread them out on the floor, and told a story out loud. At age eight, he wrote his first novel, a three-page thriller about a mad scientist. And at the ripe old age of ten, he took his hard-earned grass-mowing and odd-job money to the store. He needed a bicycle. He bought a typewriter.

He is married to author and frequent co-author, Rebecca Moesta. Kevin is an avid hiker who does much of his writing with the use of a hand-held tape recorder while on long nature walks.

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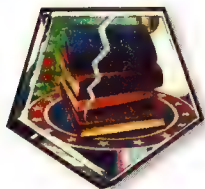
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It's Not Over Till the Fat Alien Sings

"SPACE OPERA," I told my editor when I looked at the list of titles up for review. "A new *Star Trek* hardcover, a new novel from Bujold, a new Mageworlds book. Definitely space opera."

Then I read the books and saw it wasn't quite that simple.

Part of the problem lies in defining "space opera" in the first place. It's not difficult to come up with examples: Doc Smith's Lensman novels and the *Star Wars* movies are frequent citations; more recent candidates include Simon Green's Deathstalker books and the Exordium series from Sherwood Smith and Dave Trowbridge.

All these share a high action-adventure quotient, briskly paced plots, and unabashedly heroic or villainous characters. But there's a catch, because in some quarters the phrase "space opera" is as much pejorative as descriptive, shorthand for "cardboard characters, cheap melodrama, no serious ambition." Depending on who you talk to, space opera is either the literary equivalent of popcorn (fun but essentially harmless) or oversugared breakfast cereal (capable of rotting the brain). If one accepts the latter position, then "quality space opera" is something of a contradiction in terms; no matter how many vitamins you add to the formula, junk food is still junk food.

Yet the literary landscape suggests otherwise. Fast-moving action doesn't always preclude strong character-based conflict, and a series born as high melodrama can evolve into something more three-dimensional as

new volumes appear, or take a left turn into an entirely different subgenre.

For instance . . .

Star Trek: Vulcan's Heart

Joseph Sherman and Susan Schwartz
Pocket (hc, 378 pp.)
0-671-01544-3 \$23.00

You can certainly call *Vulcan's Heart* a space opera—high-energy starship battles, breathless pursuits, and dangerous combat sequences are in ample supply. But collaborators Joseph Sherman and Susan Schwartz deliver a good deal more than a breakneck adventure yarn. Like the duo's earlier *Vulcan's Forge*, this book is a superior *Star Trek* story and a first-rate SF novel in one package, a volume that deserves serious attention from voters for the genre's various awards.

As in the prior book, Spock is a key figure but not the sole protagonist. Saavik, seen in

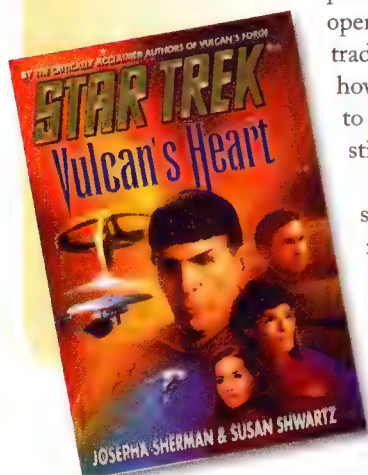
the first few *Star Trek* feature films, returns in a major role, as does the elegantly chilling Romulan Commander from the original-series episode "The Enterprise Incident." And a host of other characters, many with names longtime fans will find familiar, appear as supporting players or in cameo parts.

What's distinctive about *Vulcan's Heart* is its complexity. Rarely in *Trek* fiction have we seen so convoluted a plot, interweaving Spock's marriage with a crisis in Romulan politics that's extrapolated from the televised continuity with diabolical flair. Most of the novel, in fact, takes place on the Romulan homeworld, where Spock's hybrid metabolism picks the worst possible moment to trigger *pon farr*—the Vulcan mating drive.

What could easily have degenerated into melodrama at this point instead, in Sherman's and Schwartz's hands, escalates into a compelling test of character and resolve. The effects and consequences of the *pon farr* condition are treated with ruthless plausibility, and the contrast of Vulcan logic and Romulan passion drives the story forward with an intensity unmatched in any other *Trek* novel to date.

And "intensity" is the right word. Sherman and Schwartz expertly dovetail the legendary Vulcan reticence about matters of biology with a subtle but brutal frankness about the emotions and needs that underlie that reserve. The result is prose that shivers with barely restrained tension, remaining true to *Star Trek's* spirit while reaching beyond it. Both authors have referred to the book as "the first Rated *Star Trek* novel," and they're not wrong. Though the words by themselves are

**This month,
we take a
look at the
many faces
of that
beloved(?)
subgenre,
space
opera.**



sedate enough, the tone is mature to a degree *Star Trek* fans have never before seen on the printed page.

Fans should consider *Vulcan's Heart* a book not to be missed. But while the novel is a bit less accessible to non-*Trek* audiences than was *Vulcan's Forge*, it is by any measure a skillfully told tale with enough sheer power to deserve the widest possible readership.

The Stars Asunder

Debra Doyle and
James D. Macdonald
Tor (hc, 351 pp.)
0-312-86410-8 \$24.95

Various observers, myself included, have referred to the five previous Mageworlds novels as among the premier space operas of current SF—full of rapid-fire adventure, bloody intrigue, and sharp-witted repartée. By these standards, *The Stars Asunder* is positively genteel; the space battles are few and far between, and the plot unfolds at a measured, almost deliberate pace.

As the story opens (half a millennium prior to the events of the previous books), life in the Mageworlds appears relatively quiet, even dull. The most serious crisis is the weather, as a major storm unexpectedly arises to threaten a fishing fleet. Elsewhere, one young man inherits an old country estate, and another embarks on an apprenticeship aboard one of his family's spacefaring trade vessels.

All is not as peaceful as it seems, however, and the novel is far from dull reading. For the new-minted apprentice, nicknamed "Professor" who haunts the rest of the series, and *The Stars Asunder* tells—among other things—how he came to be

exiled from the worlds of his birth.

Exile and isolation, in fact, are the novel's dominant images. The Mage-Circle assembled by Garrod syn-Aigal at Demaizen Old Hall is effectively composed of exiles, men and women who walk apart from their fellows in society. The shadowy cabal promoting civil war among the Mageworlds' ruling trade-families draws membership from those who feel left out of their worlds' governance. 'Rekhe himself feels but loosely bonded to his own trade-family, being drawn to Magecraft rather than to politics. And it's Garrod's contention that the Mageworlds themselves are isolated, cut off

with respect to the Mages' capacity for self-sacrifice. That's admirable SF, and *The Stars Asunder* is skillfully constructed. Set next to its companion volumes, though, it is at best an odd fit. Readers who expect razzle-dazzle space opera won't find it here—but what they will find is just as readable, and perhaps even more rewarding.

A Civil Campaign

Lois McMaster Bujold
Baen (hc, 416 pp.)
0-671-57827-8 \$24.00

Though it's most often characterized as a space-opera series, Lois McMaster Bujold's Vorkosigan saga has crossed genre lines several

is peppered with political subplots, two main strands drive the narrative. One is Miles's relationship with Ekaterin; though he's fallen hopelessly in love with her, he goes to spectacular lengths to hide his feelings and to discourage a variety of rivals. The second involves Mark's patronage of an eccentric scientist who's discovered a unique food source with fantastic profit potential: butter bugs. The result of genetic engineering, butter bugs can eat almost anything and process it into a cheeselike substance with perfectly balanced nutritive value. This food substance can be further processed into a variety

There's no doubt that *A Civil Campaign* is highly readable and quite often amusing, with a host of comic turns, but . . .

from an opportunity-filled galaxy—a condition he hopes to change by raising more Mage-power than has ever before been conjured.

The assorted conspiracies breed a variety of intrigues, though even the darkest of these tend to use violence sparingly and commit murder as neatly as possible. And the Mage-Circles, whose martial-arts rituals regularly involve injury and sometimes death to raise power, go about the business of combat with chilling calm.

The result is a tale that's both intimate and curiously distant. Doyle and Macdonald present a likable, lively cast whose personal lives and actions we can understand, often all too well. At the same time, the ways of Magery are unmistakably alien and occasionally disquieting, especially

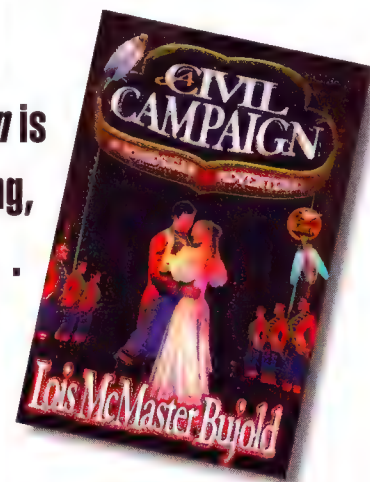
times during its evolution. The latest entry is no exception: The title page bills *A Civil Campaign* as "a comedy of biology and manners." But while Bujold provides a number of entertaining set pieces in the drawing-room tradition she invokes, the novel as a whole is less than the sum of its parts.

Fans of the series doubtless will be pleased to see many favorite characters reappear, including the impetuous Ivan Vorpatril, Miles Vorkosigan's clone/twin brother Mark, retired spymaster Simon Illyan (former head of Imperial Security), and Emperor Gregor Vorbarra. Also returning is the lovely Ekaterin Vorsoisson, still recovering from her husband's death during the events of *Komarr*, predecessor to the present book.

Although *A Civil Campaign*

of products. The catch is that the bugs' appearance is disgusting; Mark needs investment capital to keep the project alive, but Miles has an understandable "yuck" reaction to eating bug butter.

While the butter bugs make excellent comedic material, their plot potential suffers from two problems. The first is scientific: As described, the bugs appear to violate conservation-of-energy principles, in that they produce more and better food than they ingest yet expend almost no energy to do so. Moreover, there's a tonal inconsistency. Bujold treats the bugs mostly as a comic device, and that—



Scientifiction

especially in drawing-room melodrama—foreshadows an ending that simply never materializes. Instead, the author resolves the butter-bug plot line as if the novel were straight SF, and the effect is rather like ending a *Star Trek* tribble story without an excruciating pun.

The outcome of Miles's dealings with Ekaterin is much more emotionally satisfying. Here Bujold is on firmer ground, and Ekaterin in particular is an appealing and well-drawn character. But reservations are still in order. The actions to which Miles is forced as the novel progresses are the right ones—but it's unclear at the end of the book whether

with a host of comic turns that should entertain Bujold's many fans. But there are too many loose ends in the novel to brand it a successful comedy of manners, particularly if it's meant to stand on its own merits. It's tempting to wonder if another direct sequel is forthcoming, completing a trilogy within the larger series. Until such a hypothetical volume appears, though, this Vorkosigan adventure must be ranked no better than an average addition to the history of this popular SF universe.

One can push a metaphor only so far; it might be possible to tack space-opera connections onto the next two novels, but it would be stretching the point. It's more appropriate simply to note that they represent

there in 1969. Poul Anderson's *Operation Luna* is the latest addition to this venerable category, and like many of its predecessors, it features dedicated NASA scientists, crack-jack pilots, and rigorous attention to authentic technical detail.

Of course, in this case NASA is the National Astral Spellcraft Administration, and the spacecraft is a highly advanced flying broom. . . .

Anderson has worked out the novel's alternate Earth setting with impressive thoroughness. Though its operating principles are consistent with what we'd call magic, they're developed and defined with strict scientific precision, to the extent that the novel arguably qualifies as hard SF. This is no small feat, considering that narrator Steve Matuchek is a werewolf and that a host of other classi-

cal liberal doses of international and interworldly intrigue. These are present in ample measure, notably including an encounter with an inscrutably dangerous Eastern sorcerer. What Anderson adds to the formula is an earnest domestic charm. Ginny and Steve are the parents of three lively children, the oldest a precocious teenager in line to equal or surpass her mother's magical gifts. So they complement their investigation and questing with breakfasts in bed and the search for babysitters.

Anderson balances the diverse elements of his story with amiable efficiency and a smooth, controlled wit. An agent for the IRS—Inquisition for Revenue Securement—is a nuisance without being cartoonish, a talking sword is understandably loquacious but not insufferable, and when the Trickster-demi-god Coyote appears on the scene he's plausibly irreverent without straying into caricature. The novel expertly walks the line between comic and cosmic, displaying a sense of place that might be termed "worldly" in a literal as well as a metaphorical context.

Operation Luna is such a friendly, accessible yarn that it's hard to see it as a major work in Poul Anderson's long and distinguished science fiction career. Yet in a sense, it really can be counted among Anderson's most distinctive books, a novel that demonstrates more than most his extraordinary range and versatility, and his ability to draw seemingly contradictory ideas into a consistent and fascinating whole. That's science fiction of the purest kind, and a gift well worth treasuring. 🐾

Author John C. Bunnell has been reviewing SF and fantasy professionally since 1984.

Anderson's latest features dedicated NASA scientists, crackerjack pilots, and rigorous attention to authentic detail.

intriguing work from opposite ends of the SF continuum. Poul Anderson is a certified Grand Master and one of SF's most eminent practitioners; Sharon Shinn was twice nominated for the John W. Campbell Award honoring the genre's brightest new talents. Traditional SF has rarely been in more capable hands.

Operation Luna

Poul Anderson
Tor (hc, 320 pp.)
0-312-86706-9 \$22.95

Tales of reaching and exploring the Moon have been one of SF's most enduring and classic subgenres, persisting even after we really did land

cal and mythic creatures populates the cast.

Though the book is a sequel to Anderson's earlier *Operation Chaos*, it stands comfortably on its own. Matuchek and his wife, licensed witch Ginny Graylock, are attached to a semiprivate project seeking to send a manned mission to the Moon—which in this universe is inhabited, though by whom or what, no one is quite sure. When accidents and setbacks begin to disrupt the venture, investigation suggests that foreign magical powers are involved, and from there complications multiply like rabbits.

The premise suggests a familiar adventure yarn with



Miles has genuinely learned from his experiences or merely bowed to pressure under fire. That uncertainty, like the butter-bug resolution, is at odds with the tidy, optimistic endings traditional for comedies of manners. And it doesn't help that, because Miles's usual acumen for intrigue is operating below standard, it's left to Ivan to play the hero in resolving yet another key subplot.

There's no doubt that *A Civil Campaign* is highly readable and quite often amusing,



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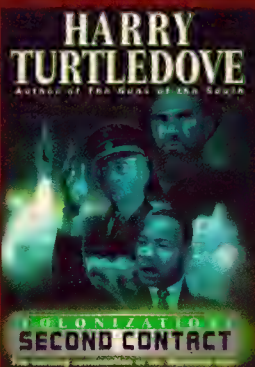
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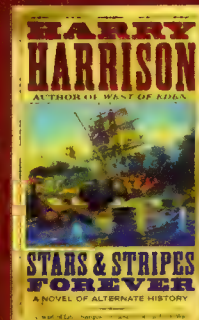
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STAR TREK
VOYAGER

Chapter One:

THE SPACE VORTEX OF DOOM

BY D. W. "PROF" SMITH



APTAIN PROTON fought the controls of his spaceship like a cowboy trying to control a bucking horse—hard at times, then gently, then hard again as needed. The levers moved under his sure hands: back and forth, back and forth.

But the ship seemed to have a mind all its own, fighting him, slowing as if it were caught in thick mud.

"Turn on the Imagizer!" he ordered.

A gray vision filled the panel in front of him. The grayness seemed to be alive, swarming, surrounding the ship.

Constance Goodheart screamed!

"We're doomed!" Buster Kincaid exploded.

The Imagizer in front of Captain Proton showed nothing but a gray fog, thicker than any soup. No sign of open space at all.

But Captain Proton knew this was no fog. "Minions!" he exclaimed, fighting even harder at the controls, trying to force the ship by sheer will through the mass that surrounded them.

Push!

Shove!

Yank!

His hands worked the spaceship's controls.

Nothing!

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRISTOPHER MOELLER

No instant response like he normally got from his ship. No banking turns, no feeling of thrust into the ether.

"It's not working!" Buster Kincaid shouted. "They've stopped us cold in space!"

"Keep the engines on full speed ahead!" Proton ordered his trusty friend and ace reporter. "We'll make them work to keep us here."

"Engines on full!" Kincaid said. "Still not moving!"

Captain Proton knew why, too. Standing at the control panel, he braced himself and kept his hands firmly on the controls, hoping for a slight opening in the gray, squirming fog that covered the Imagizer in front of him—anything at all that might give them a chance to escape from the dreaded cloud of Minions.

Each Minion was an ant-sized flying creature with a smooth forehead and almost no brains. But the Minions had the ability to work together through telepathic means. And the ability to fly in space. Individually, they were nothing more than annoying bugs. But working together, in clouds of billions, they could stop a spaceship dead in the void, just as they had just done to his ship.

Within an hour, they would crush the ship. As far as Cap-

Captain Proton could feel the blood in his face draining away. The Blaster Ship that Chaotica referred to was the only one in all the Galaxy. It was huge and powerful. The rumors said it was powerful enough to move entire suns. Proton knew that Chaotica's Blaster Ship, if it was finished, would be death to Earth and the Patrol. His mission had been to make sure it was never finished.

Chaotica had just told him he was too late.

Captain Proton forced himself to stare back at Chaotica. "I'd say there is still some time left in this day," Proton said defiantly. "We shall see who smiles at the end of it all!"

"The pleasure of watching you die would be all mine," Chaotica chortled. "But I'm afraid I don't have time for such small details. Earth awaits me!"

Then he broke the connection, leaving the three valiant heroes in silence in their doomed ship.

"What are we going to do?" Kincaid wondered.

"First," Proton answered, "we're going to get out of this cloud of Minions. Chaotica might be able to control them, but his Minions can't hold us!"

"How?" Kincaid asked, clearly surprised.

Proton smiled at his best friend. "Just do as I say, and



Proton smiled. "Just do as I say, and watch," he said, again grasping the control levers of his Patrol ship. "Constance, grab something and hold on tight."

tain Proton knew, no one had ever escaped a cloud of Minions. Despite their tiny size, they were the most feared creatures of the spaceways. Normally they kept to their own system—but now they were a long way from home, surrounding his ship. Captain Proton didn't like that idea at all. It meant something had changed about them, or someone was controlling them.

Suddenly the Imagizer flickered, and the gray fog of Minions was replaced by the devilish face of Dr. Chaotica, the meanest man in all of known space. Chaotica's stated goal was to control the entire Galaxy, and he would use any means to do so. The only things that stood between him and Galaxywide domination was Earth, the Incorporated Planets, and the Interstellar Patrol, of which Captain Proton was a member.

Captain Proton knew immediately who was controlling the Minions.

Dr. Chaotica laughed—a long, evil sound that made Captain Proton's blood run cold.

Constance screamed again.

"What do you want, Chaotica?" Proton demanded, taking his hands from the controls and placing them on his hips in a show of defiance.

"It seems I have what I want," Chaotica said with a wicked laugh. "You are trapped by my Minions. You will soon be crushed. And to make my day perfect, my Blaster Ship is finished." Again his laugh filled Captain Proton's ship, leaving its evil touch on every surface, every dial, every button, like a film of scum.

watch," he said, again grasping the control levers of his Patrol ship. "Constance, grab something and hold on tight."

The blonde secretary nodded, grabbing a nearby railing while staring at the gray mass of Minions on the Imagizer.

"Are the engines still on full forward?" Proton asked.

"They are," Kincaid replied.

"Good. On my command, throw them into full reverse."

"That might blow everything up!" Kincaid cried, a worried look on his face.

"I know my ship," Proton said reassuringly, his hands grasping the controls. "Just do it. Now!"

Kincaid flipped the switch, sending the ship's engines into full reverse—a mode rarely used in space.

Everything bumped and vibrated around them, as if a giant hand was trying to shake the ship apart. But Captain Proton could feel the ship move. The Minions' grip on them clearly wasn't as tight as Chaotica had thought.

Captain Proton waited until the backward movement of the ship slowed, then shouted, "Now full forward!"

Kincaid did as he was told, flipping the switch back to forward thrust.

Smoke drifted from two panels.

Sparks flew everywhere.

Constance screamed!

A drop of sweat formed on Captain Proton's forehead, but he ignored it, instead focusing on the feel of the ship as it rocked back, then forward in the mass of Minions. This time

the ship moved a little farther, a little quicker.

He waited as the motion slowed.

Waited.

Waited. . . .

Then at just the right moment he shouted, "Now reverse again!"

Kincaid did as he was ordered, flipping the switch back.

It was as if the ship had run head-on into a giant moon. Everything shook.

Sparks flew.

Smoke filled the room.

But Captain Proton could tell his idea was working. He was treating the ship as if it were an automobile stuck in the snow. The Minions were strong enough to hold the ship from moving in one direction, but not both. He could rock his way back and forth and get out.

This time they were moving backward at a good speed. Almost free.

He waited again until the Minions outside slowed the ship nearly to a stop, then shouted, "Now, Kincaid! Full power forward! Give it all you've got!"

Buster flipped the switch again, throwing the ship into forward, then twisted the dial that increased the thrust to maximum redline power. The ship had nothing left to give.

Everything shook.

Sparks flew!

Smoke poured out of every opening!

Constance screamed!

"Don't worry, my dear!" Proton said, shouting to make himself heard over the roar of the engines and the shaking of the entire ship.

He grasped the controls firmly, shoving the pointed nose of the ship directly forward through the Minions like a needle through skin.

The ship bucked.

Kincaid was tossed away from his station and smashed into a panel.

"You all right?" Proton shouted over the intense noise.

"Fine!" Kincaid returned as he scrambled to his feet.

Captain Proton kept his steely gaze focused dead ahead. This was their only chance. The ship wouldn't hold together for another try at full power.

He could tell they were breaking loose.

They were gaining speed!

Suddenly the Imagizer showed clear space in front of them.

Captain Proton cut the ship low into the gravity well of a nearby moon, using it to slingshot them into the depths of space and away from the cloud of Minions.

"We're free!" Kincaid rejoiced.

Constance beamed.

But Captain Proton remained firm at the controls, his face stern, his look frozen straight ahead. "Earth is in great danger. We must stop Chaotica and his Blaster Ship!"

"But how?" Kincaid asked. "Not even the entire Patrol can stop a Blaster Ship."

"Maybe the entire Patrol can't. . . ." Proton replied, "but maybe one man can!" He stared ahead at the emptiness of space as he sped after Chaotica and his Blaster Ship.

"You have a plan!" Kincaid beamed.

"I have a plan," Proton answered. "Full speed ahead!"

Soon the giant bulk of Chaotica's Blaster Ship filled the Imagizer. It was long and sleek-looking, sort of like a giant silver bullet, the biggest thing Proton had ever seen—a hundred times bigger than the ship they were on.

It had a sharp, needle-nose front and six large fins along the back half, which kept it stable. On each of the six fins, a massive jet shoved the Blaster Ship through the ether. Clearly, Chaotica was heading for Earth at full speed. Luckily, Captain Proton's ship was faster.

Giant weapons stuck out from the nose of the Blaster Ship—weapons that could destroy an entire planet at the flick of a single switch. The Blaster Ship couldn't be allowed to get anywhere near Earth!

"We're going to sneak up behind him," Captain Proton observed.

"Brilliant!" Kincaid chortled. "Chaotica thinks the Minions have destroyed us, so he won't be looking for us."

"Exactly! Take over the controls, Kincaid," Proton ordered. "Fly us right between the huge jets."

Kincaid suddenly broke into a massive sweat as he took the controls of the ship. "Between the jets? We'll be killed!"

Proton patted his trusted friend on the back. "There's enough room, and you're a good pilot," Proton reassured him. "Just get us in there so I can jump to the service hatch."

"You're going inside?" Kincaid shouted, glancing back at where Captain Proton was putting on his space gear.

"Yes," Proton answered as he quickly finished donning his vacuum suit. "It's the only way to stop the ship." He moved toward his ship's airlock. "Now fly us between those jets to that service hatch."

Kincaid nodded. Carefully he inched the sleek, silver craft of Captain Proton between the fins of the giant ship. A few seconds later he bumped the nose of Proton's ship lightly against the service hatch of Dr. Chaotica's massive Blaster Ship and let out a huge sigh.

"Well done!" Proton exclaimed.

Around them the rockets of Chaotica's ship sent great plumes of fire into space, heating up the insides of Proton's ship like a toaster.

Captain Proton saluted his good friend Kincaid, then kissed Constance on the cheek.

"Good luck," said his faithful secretary. "Please be careful."

"Don't worry, my dear," Proton said, donning his helmet. Then, to both of his companions, he added, "It's going to get hot in here while I'm gone. But stay and wait for me. I will return!"

"Understood," Kincaid replied, saluting back. "No matter how hot it gets, we'll be here."

Proton nodded, then quickly went through the hatch into space. It didn't take him long to get inside the dark regions of Dr. Chaotica's Blaster Ship. The ship was simple in design, so he easily figured out how to get where he wanted to go. . . .

In the control room of the massive ship, Dr. Chaotica stood, staring through his Imagizer at the space ahead. There were only two other men in the room—one flying the ship,

and one manning the weapons panel, ready to fire on any vessel that dared to try to stop them. But no ship would dare. The Blaster Ship was too large, too powerful.

Captain Proton came in silently, his gun drawn. "Halt this ship in the name of the Incorporated Planets and the Interstellar Patrol!"

Chaotica spun around and glared at Proton. "You could not have escaped my Minions!"

"Then it must be my ghost you see before you!" Proton replied with a sly grin.

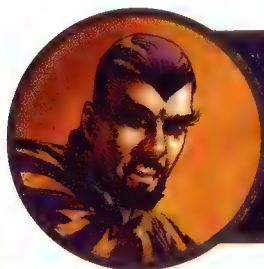
The man at the weapons panel started to draw his weapon. Proton fired his ray gun, hitting the man and sending him flying over the panel.

But the other man was quick. He got off a shot at Captain Proton, just barely missing and causing Proton to duck behind a wall.

Proton fired back.

The man fired again.

"Too late, Proton!" Chaotica shouted. He moved over to the weapons panel and punched a huge button. "I have just started a giant red star on its way to your home world, Earth. Nothing can stop it!"



Chaotica took a large energy pistol out of his belt and fired at Proton, just missing but exploding the panel in front of him. "You don't know what you have done!" Chaotica shouted.

On the Blaster Ship's Imagizer, Proton could see that Chaotica told the truth. A beam of red shot out from the ship, directly hitting a nearby giant red star and sending it plummeting toward Earth.

Proton quickly fired his gun at the pilot's control panel, blowing it into smoke and sparks. Because of all the lights that blinked on it, he could tell that panel was the most important one in the ship. Destroy it, and the ship would lose all power.

Around the rest of the control room, panels exploded like a string of firecrackers.

Buttons, levers, and panel covers flew everywhere.

Smoke filled the control room.

Chaotica stepped back, anger and fear showing on his face. Around them the ship started to shake as if it were in an earthquake—slowly at first, then quickly building. Proton knew no ship could withstand such shaking for long.

Chaotica took a large energy pistol out of his belt and fired at Proton, just missing but exploding the panel in front of him. "You don't know what you have done!" Chaotica shouted.

Proton did know, but he didn't tell Chaotica that.

The rumbling got stronger. Now it seemed as though a giant hand had grasped the Blaster Ship and was shaking it vigorously.

Captain Proton fired back at Chaotica, sending the evil doctor scrambling for cover. "Your new ship seems to be having a problem, Doctor!" Proton shouted through the smoke. "Just how much damage did I do?" he taunted.

"Kill him!" Chaotica shouted to two other men as they entered the control room.

Then, with a flourish of his black cape, Dr. Chaotica turned and disappeared into the smoke.

Both men opened fire on Captain Proton, but he dodged their blasts and quickly knocked them out. Then he sped away to look for Chaotica. Around him, the ship kept shaking. It didn't seem as if it could hold together much longer. By destroying that panel, he had set off a chain reaction that would blow up the entire ship, just as he had planned. But he had also hoped to capture Dr. Chaotica at the same time.

He quickly searched through the corridors surrounding the control room, but he saw no sign of where the evil doctor had gone. Time was running out—capturing him would have to wait for another day. Captain Proton headed at a run for the hatch that led to his ship.

The shaking was so intense that Proton banged against walls, slipped and fell a dozen times, and tumbled head over heels twice. But finally he was out the hatch and back in his own ship.

Although his suit protected him from the extreme temperature, Proton could see right away that the heat inside his ship

was almost unbearable. Buster Kincaid and Constance were soaked in sweat, their clothes stuck to their bodies, looking more like they'd been standing in a rainstorm than manning a ship. But they were very glad to see him.

"I'll take over those controls," Captain Proton ordered as he unfastened his helmet.

Kincaid stepped aside, and Proton quickly backed their ship out from between the hot jets of the Blaster Ship into the coolness of deep space.

"I didn't know if we were going to make it," Kincaid exclaimed, panting.

"I knew you could do it," Proton replied. "Watch!"

He pointed at the Imagizer as the huge Blaster Ship exploded with a massive rumble.

"Shock wave!" Proton shouted. "Hold on!"

The shock wave from the explosion tossed Proton's ship as if it were a child's toy on an ocean wave, then passed by.

"You've destroyed Chaotica's Blaster Ship!" Kincaid shouted. "Earth is saved!"

"I wish that were the case," Proton warned. He quickly adjusted the Imagizer so it showed the giant red star plummeting toward Earth. "Chaotica put his evil plan in motion before I could stop it."

"What are we going to do?" Kincaid wailed.

"We're going to save Earth," Captain Proton said, his hands holding the controls of his ship tightly. "But it may cost us our lives."

Kincaid nodded. "I'll gladly give my life to save our home planet!"

"Constance?" Proton asked, turning to his sweat-soaked secretary.

She grasped hold of a railing and nodded.

"Good," Proton said forcefully, turning back to his controls. "I knew I could count on you two one final time."

"But how can this small ship ever stop a giant red star?" Kincaid asked.

"This ship can't," Proton answered. "But the Space Vortex of Doom can."

Kincaid turned white.

Constance screamed at the very mention of the name.

Captain Proton kept his ship blasting through the ether. "We have one chance. The giant red star will pass the Space Vortex of Doom in exactly six minutes."

"But by my calculations, the giant red star will miss the Space Vortex of Doom," Kincaid said.

"I know that," Proton replied. "So we must increase the reach of the Space Vortex of Doom. The Vortex is a giant whirlpool in space, correct?"

Kincaid nodded.

"So if we dive our ship into the Space Vortex of Doom," Proton explained, "going in the same direction as the spin and accelerating, we might increase the spin and expand the reach of the Vortex."

"So it grabs the giant red star as it passes!" Kincaid exclaimed.

"Exactly!" Proton answered. "Now, man your station. I'll need you to fire all weapons straight ahead when I give the order! We'll try to give the Vortex even more energy to help it speed up!"

"Understood!" Kincaid confirmed, stepping smartly to his station.

Proton gripped the controls of his ship firmly as Kincaid's hand poised over the firing button.

On the Imagizer in front of them, the swirling black mass of the Space Vortex of Doom turned slowly, sucking down into its maw anything that strayed close. No ship, no beam of light, nothing had ever escaped the intense gravity of the Vortex of Doom.

Captain Proton hoped the giant red star would join that list of missing objects soon.

"We're going in!" Captain Proton shouted as the ship started to shake.

They crossed over the threshold of the Space Vortex of Doom, and the blackness of it surrounded them, swallowed them like they were in the middle of a dark night on a moonless planet.

"Full speed ahead!" Proton ordered.

Kincaid twisted the dial, giving the ship full power.

"We're moving with the spin!" Proton shouted over the roar and the shaking. "Fire all weapons straight ahead!"

"Firing!" Kincaid shouted.

Around them, the swirling blackness of the Space Vortex of Doom seemed to speed up. But there was still no sign of the giant red star.

"Fire again!" Proton ordered. "We're almost out of time!"

Kincaid did as he was told, punching the button on his panel extra hard.

Now it was clear that the blackness in motion around them had sped up.

Would it be enough to grab the giant red star?

Could they save Earth?

Captain Proton held his breath, keeping his ship moving with the current.

Buster Kincaid held his breath.

Constance Goodheart held her breath.

Suddenly the blackness around them seemed to turn a faint pink.

Then red.

Then bright red as the giant red star flashed past them and down into the depths of the Space Vortex of Doom, swirling the blackness with streaks of red.

"It worked!" Kincaid shouted.

"Yes," Proton replied. "We have saved Earth! Hold on!"

The tidal wave of Space Vortex matter smashed into them, sucking them down behind the giant red star.

No one had ever lived after coming that close to a giant red star.

No one had ever escaped from the Space Vortex of Doom.

Constance Goodheart screamed!

Captain Proton stood at the controls of his ship, fighting with all his strength to keep them from following the giant red star into the darkness below. Sweat covered his brow as the blackness swirled around them.

He was losing.

There was no escaping the Space Vortex of Doom.

Downward they spiraled.

Downward . . .

Downward . . .

Into the blackness. ☹

To be continued . . .

In Chapter Two, follow Captain Proton, Buster Kincaid, and Constance Goodheart as they fight to save the Interstellar Patrol from the clutches of the evil Dr. Chaotica. Find Chapter Two in the special release Captain Proton!, coming soon from Pocket Books. Don't miss a single spellbinding episode of The Adventures of Captain Proton!

about the author

The author of dozens of feature-length novels, hundreds of short stories, and even a few unpublished poems, D. W. "Prof" Smith always takes Captain Proton fans on a breathless journey through the Galaxy and beyond! His alter-ego, noted Star Trek author Dean Wesley Smith, is the recipient of the World Fantasy and Locus awards.



about the illustrator

Christopher Moeller has been writing and painting graphic novels from his studio in Pittsburgh since 1991, the most recent being "Sheva's War" for DC Comics. An avid wargamer, Moeller has also provided illustrations for a variety of game publishers, including Wizards of the Coast, OSG, White Wolf, and FASA.



A world is doomed. The U.S.S. Enterprise faces the most formidable enemy of all—time—hoping to prevent the planet's people from meeting the same fate.

BY M. SHAYNE BELL

Life Itself Is Reason Enough

CAPTAIN'S LOG: STARDATE 47738.1.

We are continuing to assist in the evacuation of several colony worlds in Sector 225 that have entered deadly ionized dust clouds. This strange phenomenon is so thick that it blocks all planets from necessary light and heat. At the current rate, the atmospheric gases will soon freeze, cascade down to the planets, and extinguish all life.

We are leading one hundred eighty-three merchant ships, scientific vessels, even the odd sailing yacht to Nunanavik, an arctic world settled by Inuit from Earth. The dust makes transporter use impossible, so we are forced to rely on shuttles—but the Enterprise and the ships with us do not have enough vehicles to carry away all of Nunanavik's people. Other ships are rushing to help, but it appears they will not arrive in time.

The nearest starship is the Carpathia. At this rate, it will reach Nunanavik two hours after atmosphere collapse. Unlike its namesake, which at least managed to pick up survivors from the old aquatic vessel Titanic, this Carpathia will find no one left to save.

LIEUTENANT WORF UNBOLTED the last of the shelves in the personnel shuttle *Hawking* and passed it out the door. Removing the shelving made room for at least four more people. The Klingon officer wiped the sweat off his forehead and began gathering his tools.

"Worf?"

It was Deanna Troi. Worf turned and smiled despite himself. Ever since he and Deanna had shared dinner and

champagne on his birthday, it had been harder not to smile when she was near.

"I found these straps in storage," she said. "I was thinking that we could bolt them to the walls and give people something to hang onto during flight."

"An excellent idea," Worf said. He took one of the straps from her hands and looked at it. "We can screw them into the holes where the shelving was bolted to the walls."

"I'll hunt up some screws and washers," Deanna said.

Worf nodded. "We'll need to punch holes in the tops of these straps. I'll get a tool to do that."

They both started down the ramp.

"Aren't you supposed to be sleeping?" Worf asked.

"Yes, and you are, too."

They set off in opposite directions. Worf looked back at Deanna more than once.

EVENTUALLY, DEANNA DID try to get some rest. She was exhausted—the whole crew was exhausted—but she could not fall asleep. She sat on the edge of her bed, then stood to pace the darkened room. As an empath, she had been trained from adolescence to put aside the troubles of others, but sometimes the troubles were so great that no one, however well trained, could sleep. She had felt a similar wakefulness many times, but this was odd. The *Enterprise* had not yet entered the system where Nunanavik awaited. She should not have been feeling anything but her own weariness and the regular troubles of the crew.

ILLUSTRATION BY RUSSELL WALKS

And yet she was. There had to be a reason.

She dressed quickly and left for the bridge. Data had the helm. When the turbolift doors opened, he turned to her, then stood. "Counselor Troi," he said.

Deanna thought that even the android looked tired. "Have we changed our ETA at Nunanavik?" she asked.

"No," he said. "We will enter orbit around the planet in two hours and thirty-eight minutes, exactly as estimated when we set course."

Was she just imagining what the people on Nunanavik were feeling?

"Is something wrong?" Data asked.

Deanna explained. "Have we learned anything new?"

"Very little. Twenty-three words, to be precise."

"Words?"

"Twelve ships leaving Nunanavik have passed within sensor and communication range. The ionized dust garbled their transmissions. The computer is attempting to sort out anything meaningful, but it has been able to decipher only twenty-three words from the static, none of them in context or—"

"What were those words?"

"From the first ship: *frostbitten, dying, cold*; from the second: *cold*; from the third, a phrase: "Help them," and again the word *cold*; from the fourth—"

"Thank you, Data." That was it, Deanna thought. She was picking up the feelings of people lucky enough to be aboard ships *leaving* Nunanavik.

"Three more ships passing the *Enterprise*," an ensign reported.

"Open all hailing frequencies," Data said. "Attempt to establish contact."

Any information the ships could provide might help them.

And Deanna sat down, almost overcome by the loss and heartbreak emanating from those crowded ships.

"All communications garbled as before," another ensign reported. "Computer attempting to decipher."

Data turned back to Deanna. "We will likely pass many more ships. Every available craft will certainly attempt exit before atmosphere collapse. Shall I order you a sedative from sickbay? You still have some time to sleep."

"No," Deanna said. "I don't think even a sedative could make me sleep now. I'm going back to the main shuttlebay. I'm sure the maintenance crews can use two more hands."

ATMOSPHERE COLLAPSE: 5 HOURS, 23 MINUTES, 18 SECONDS

"IS THAT THE best picture you can display?" Captain Picard asked.

The main viewer on the bridge showed a world shrouded in dust.

"No," Data said. "That is the actual view. I have programmed the computer to remove eighty-eight point seven percent of the dust from the image on screen. If we were to remove one hundred percent, the image would break up into inconsistent—"

"Put it on screen," Picard ordered.

The image before them was replaced with one much brighter. It showed a world blue and white with ice and snow. It was so bright that some people viewing it had to look away. Data shaded the brighter tones, and the light softened. "By now the temperature is cold enough that all the water vapor will have condensed out of the atmosphere," he said. "The snow and ice on the surface will be quite deep."

"How does this compare to images recorded before the dust cloud?" Picard asked.

Data entered commands into the computer. The main viewer began to display older images, each darker than what they had been seeing, though they all looked icy and cold.

"It is now summer in Nunanavik's northern hemisphere," Data said. "As you know, arctic worlds such as this show little seasonal variation. Still, the difference between what was normal and what we are now seeing is striking. Here is the current image again."

The room visibly brightened.

"I calculate that ninety-eight point six percent of the surface is abnormally covered with snow or ice," Data said.

"At least the people down there know how to handle cold," Picard said.

"Not a temperature that freezes the atmosphere," Data said.

"We have audio and visual incoming from Nunanavik," Commander Riker announced.

"On screen, Number One," Picard said.

The image of a young Inuit woman wrapped in furs appeared before them. She was shivering. "... freezing, dying. Population down one third. We've called those left into the following sixteen settlements: Inuvik, Tanana, Anvik, Thule..."

Shortly after she finished sending the names, the message began to break up.

"Tell her help is on the way," Picard said. "Data, work that list of settlements into the evacuation plan. Riker, how long before we're ready to launch the shuttles?"

"Thirty-one minutes."

"Data, take the helm. Riker, Worf, Troi, La Forge, Crusher—to the conference lounge."

DEANNA WAS FINISHING the final flight check of the cargo shuttle *Fossey's* environmental systems when she got the call to the meeting. The air tanks were full, and she marked their status on the flight-check board before hurrying to the turbolift. Worf entered just ahead of her. He held the doors until she had stepped inside. His pleasure at seeing her again lifted her spirits. The lift shot up toward the bridge.

"Did you get any sleep?" she asked.

"There is too much work to be done to sleep. I'll sleep afterward."

But Deanna wondered if any of them would be able to sleep "afterward." They all knew they wouldn't be able to save everyone on the planet. The doors opened, and Deanna and Worf hurried toward the conference lounge. Dr. Crusher entered just ahead of them.

Captain Picard was conferring with those who were already present. "La Forge, status report on the transporters. Can we use them?"

"No, sir," replied the chief engineer. "The dust cloud remains consistently thick. If we tried to transport through it, we'd lose matter-stream integrity."

He had been expecting that answer; nevertheless, Picard looked resigned. "We're almost finished stripping down the shuttles to make room for more people," the captain said. "Cargo shuttles can now carry fifty. Personnel shuttles, twelve—but people will have to stand. The *Calypso*, thirty."

They were depressingly low numbers, but it was the best they could do.

"Flight crew status, Riker," Picard said. "Everyone ready?"

"Pilots are flight-ready, but we're short one copilot," Riker said.

"Lieutenant Barretto is clinically exhausted," Dr. Crusher said. "I could not certify him."

"We're scrambling for a replacement," Riker said.

Deanna spoke up. "I've been studying shuttle-flight piloting in the holodeck, and I passed Level Four when we docked at Earth Station *McKinley*."

Level Four required fifty hours of actual shuttle flight. "More than enough for a copilot," Picard said.

"I'd be honored if she were to fly with me," Worf said.

"Make it so," the captain said. Picard, La Forge, and Riker were also on the roster of flight-ready pilots—just in case it became necessary to make immediate command-level decisions down on the planet's surface. Picard was flying the captain's yacht, the *Calypso*.

"Anything else?" Picard asked.

"Sir," Worf said. "The people on Nunanavik will fight to board shuttles. I advise sending armed guards."

Picard paused. Putting guards on the shuttles would mean fewer lives saved—but if the shuttles faced riots on the ground, even more would die. "See if you can assess on-ground security arrangements first," Picard said finally. "If communication is impossible, send two guards per shuttle."

Picard started for the door, then paused again. "Data?" he said.

"Sir," came Data's voice over the speakers.

"How many people are left to evacuate?"

"An exact figure is impossible to calculate."

"An estimate, then," Picard said, exasperation creeping into his voice.

"A conservative estimate would be in excess of eighty-two thousand."

Picard sighed. "Do your best, everyone." Then he left the room.

CONTACT WITH THE ground was nearly impossible, and most of what did come through was unintelligible, so Worf made plans to send guards on the first flights down. He left the matter up to pilot discretion after that. If they found conditions secure, they could leave the guards behind on subsequent flights.

Worf hurried to dress in Federation cold-weather gear, then boarded the cargo shuttle *Goodall*, the shuttle he would fly. Deanna was already on board downloading their flight-path assignment. She looked up at him and smiled.

Worf froze for a moment in the doorway. Counselor Deanna Troi was a fellow officer, he told himself. She was his copilot on this mission. But none of that seemed to matter when she smiled at him.

Deanna had turned back to her work. She had set her coat and hat on the floor next to her seat. The sleeves were too bulky for her to work in comfortably. "We're headed for Anvik," she said. "A city on the second largest continent, ten degrees from the equator—a once balmy port city, by this world's standards."

Worf sat down. "How many people?" he asked.

"Data's best estimate is five thousand thirty-two."

Worf began running the preflight diagnostics, and Deanna performed her part flawlessly. "You have learned well," he told her.

"Thank you," she said.

Worf forced himself to concentrate. They finished their flight checks. He saw that the two security guards were in their seats. While they waited for liftoff clearance, he contacted Data on the bridge. "How many shuttles from other craft are you sending to Anvik?" he asked.

"Eight shuttles from the merchant ship *Hong Kong* will follow you in ten minutes," Data said. "I will assign others as they become available."

"Excellent," Worf said. "That gives us time to see to security arrangements on the ground before they arrive."

They were cleared for liftoff. Worf piloted the shuttle out of the bay and took it on a rapid descent to the surface.

DEANNA DID NOT question the steepness of their trajectory. The instruments showed everything within acceptable limits, if on the outer edge. The shuttle could take what Worf was doing to it.

She breathed deeply and looked at Worf. He was all work now. He gave piloting his full concentration. She ran her checks and called out the necessary statistics. Worf acknowledged them.

But one time she caught Worf looking at her—not at the instruments, not at the world rushing up toward them. She was glad they were working together. She knew Worf had genuine confidence in her and her training, but that wasn't the only reason he'd been eager to have her assigned as his copilot.

She smiled again.

DATA WORKED WITH a calm fury to coordinate the evacuation. He and the crew on the bridge transmitted a steady stream of information to ships incoming and to the seventy-three ships already in orbit above Nunanavik. They had to set orbits, assign shuttles flight-path information, send detailed geographical data on Nunanavik that civilian craft might not routinely have, apportion shuttles to the settlements as fairly as

possible, coordinate launch times and, shortly, begin tracking the first of the return flights. Flight safety was critical. With so many people to save, they had no room for error.

"Communication with outgoing shuttles from the *Enterprise*, the *Kolinahr*, and the *Raj Veda* is currently impossible," an ensign reported.

"Attempt to reestablish contact," Data said. "Scanners, track them."

Sixty-four percent of their communications were not getting through the ionized dust on the first try. Three crew members worked just to handle requests for retransmission of data. The communication breakdown meant unavoidable delays. Data could calculate how many lives each delay cost, but he did not complete those calculations. No one would have wanted to know. They were all doing the best they could.

"The *Tamilquara* reports it is carrying materials for two pressure domes that should withstand the collapse of the atmosphere. They have the crews and just enough time to assemble them."

"How many people can those domes hold?"

"Five thousand each, standing room only, six hours' air supply."

"Send them to Inuvik," Data said.

Practically everyone in Inuvik could crowd into those domes. Data wondered what else the merchant ships might be carrying that was capable of saving lives. He assigned a team to begin making inquiries.

"Shuttles from the *Hong Kong* launched nine point five minutes ahead of schedule, sir!" an ensign reported.

Data looked up. An early launch was dangerous, given the crowded skies. "Calculate flight paths. Transmit corrections, if necessary."

"Those shuttles are coming down hard behind the *Calypso* and the *Enterprise* shuttles *Hawking* and *Goodall*!"

"Order them to pull back!" Data said. "Contact the *Hong Kong* and get them to help, too."

The crew rushed to complete those tasks. Data himself transmitted warnings to the *Enterprise* shuttles. He tried everything to reach them. Nothing worked.

The bridge grew quiet for a moment.

None of the shuttles from the *Hong Kong* was pulling back. The *Enterprise* shuttles were not beginning evasive maneuvers. None of them had received the warnings.

Data stood as the scanners tracked the flight paths, which were clearly merging. The eight shuttles from the *Hong Kong* would come down right on top of the *Enterprise* shuttles. The ensign at the scanners held onto her console as if bracing for impact.

WORF EASED HIS shuttle into Nunanavik's freezing atmosphere, then plunged it down toward the surface. He hoped to shave two minutes off their ETA in Anvik, and all indications were that he'd do that and more. There was no turbulence to interfere with their flight. Movement of the air had mostly stopped. The moisture had condensed out of the atmosphere, and there were no clouds. The clear sky was streaked with tiny

flashes of red as dust showered down around them and burned.

It was an eerie sky to fly through.

All twenty of the *Enterprise* shuttles and the *Calypso* flew together to a point above a major plateau, then split off to their destinations. Worf flew due south, in formation with the *Hawking* and the *Calypso*. They gained altitude again to cross a jagged coastal mountain range cut with deep canyons and passes and scoured by massive glaciers. The land rushing past below them was a patchwork of white snow and blue ice.

Suddenly an alarm rang out, and red light filled the shuttle.

"Eight ships incoming!" Deanna shouted.

"Attempting evasive maneuvers," Worf said, and he guided the shuttle down into a deep canyon.

But the incoming ships were all around them, ahead of them, above them.

Deanna rushed to transmit correct flight-path information. "Pull back! Pull back!" she shouted, hailing the incoming shuttles. "Correct your courses!"

The transmissions from the incoming shuttles were a confusion of panicked chatter.

"This can't be right!"

"Where did these mountains come from! There weren't supposed to be mountains!"

"*Enterprise* shuttles dead ahead!"

"Pull up!"

"Dump speed!"

Something hit the *Goodall*. Worf and Deanna watched a merchant's shuttle slam against the far canyon wall and explode. Their shuttle began to spin down toward the canyon floor.

Worf struggled to regain control, but the ice and snow rushed up at frightening speed. The shuttle shook so badly that Deanna thought it would break apart, but gradually the spinning stopped, and slowly the ship began to respond. Deanna started a damage assessment, checked fuel supplies and cabin pressure. She tried to think if there was something she should have done to prevent the crash. She wanted to ask Worf, but this was not the time.

Their flight leveled out close above the canyon floor. Neither Deanna nor Worf looked back at the snowstorm the shuttle was raising in its wake. Neither spoke. Slowly the shuttle gained altitude. The two guards on board with them cheered when it cleared the canyon rim—but the shuttle was not gaining altitude fast enough to clear the mountain pass ahead.

"We will have to abandon ship," Worf said. He could see that they were going to slam into the mountain. "Guards, put on your paragliders." By the time he finished issuing the order, the guards were already putting their arms through the shoulder straps on the devices that would enable them to coast down to the planet surface.

Seconds later, Worf shouted, "Jump!" He hit the button that blew the hatch open. An immediate blast of freezing air made them all choke.

The guards jumped. The white wings of their paragliders immediately expanded to a span of six meters, stable and graceful.

"Jump, Deanna!" Worf shouted as he eased the shuttle over a small ridge, buying them a little more time.

But Deanna was scrambling to grab her coat—which she didn't think about until she was exposed to the frigid atmosphere, and which had slid some distance away from her seat. Worf pulled on another paraglider, grabbed Deanna in his arms, and leaped through the hatch just in time.

The shuttle exploded against the mountainside. Shrapnel battered Worf and Deanna and their paraglider. Their fall seemed to go on and on, across ridges and down through a deepening valley. They slammed into a snowbank at the base of a glacier.

When they stopped tumbling, Worf thought two things: *I am alive*, and *I did not let go of Deanna*. She was limp in his arms, but he could feel her breathing.

PICARD HELD DEANNA'S charred coat and stared at the burning wreckage of the *Goodall*. He'd ordered the other shuttles to continue on, then circled back to rescue any survivors of the crash, picking up the two security guards. But he found no sign of Worf or Deanna. The *Enterprise* could not detect them—which could be just dust interference, Picard tried to tell himself. But most of the downed shuttle was still burning. They could not get near it.

And here was Deanna's coat.

There were no signs of life.

Picard was not certain that he could make himself move, but move he did. He and the guards boarded the *Calypso* and circled the area again and again, but they found no sign of Worf or Deanna. It did not appear that they had jumped. The two rescued guards told how desperate the situation had been, how little time they'd had before impact.

There was only one logical conclusion.

Picard left the crash scene, still carrying Deanna's coat.

WORF AND DEANNA had been hit again and again with shrapnel from the explosion. Worf did his best to stop their bleeding. Then he broke apart the paraglider and used pieces of the frame to set Deanna's broken right arm. Shrapnel had torn so many holes in the paraglider's wings that he wondered how it had flown as far as it had.

Deanna was freezing without her coat and hat. He picked her up, tucked her inside his coat as much as he could, and started up the mountain. Shrapnel had ripped holes in his coat and torn off his communicator. Deanna's communicator had been attached to her coat. They had no way of calling for help, nothing to do but climb up to the smoking crash site. There lay their best hope of being picked up. He hurried on.

ATMOSPHERE COLLAPSE: 3 HOURS, 6 MINUTES, 17 SECONDS

WORF DID NOT know when the three old women had come to them on the mountainside. He sat in their igloo and tried to remember, but could not. All of a sudden they had been there; they had taken Deanna out of his arms and carried her for

him, and they had brought them here.

One of the women put a cup of something hot in his hands. Worf sipped the buttery liquid. "My name is Amalik," the woman said. "My friends are Nenana and Ilingnorak. I've rescued many people from freezing before, but never a Klingon."

"I thank you for what you have done," Worf said. He looked at his watch and saw how little time they had. The women had no communicators, so he and Deanna still had to get up to the crash site. He watched the women wrap Deanna in a seal-fur parka and dress her in leggings. Worf thought she looked more beautiful than ever with her black hair contrasted against the white seal fur.

"We saw your ship coming down," Nenana said.

"Then we heard it crash, and we saw the smoke," Amalik offered.

"A different shuttle landed shortly after and took off again," added Nenana.

"What?" Worf said. He set down the cup, and he was ashamed when he felt his hands trembling. "You saw a shuttle land and leave?" he asked.

The women nodded.

"Have other shuttles returned to the crash site?"

All of them shook their heads.

He and Deanna had been abandoned for dead, Worf knew. Soon they would indeed be dead. "How far are we from Anvik?" he asked.

"Eight kilometers," said Nenana.

Worf picked up the cup and finished the warm liquid in a gulp. "We must go," he said. "We have little time."

But the women just sat there.

"Don't you know what's happening?" Worf asked.

"Of course we know," Ilingnorak said, speaking for the first time. "But you can't rescue everyone—there aren't enough ships. We're old, Klingon. We built this igloo with our hands, and we are waiting together to die."

Worf was quiet for a moment. "I admire your courage," he said finally, "but I could never wait for death like this. I would fight to live."

"Oh, to be young again and believe that life itself is reason enough for living!" Ilingnorak said.

Worf thought about that. More than people would die here, he knew. A way of life would end.

Deanna stirred. Worf helped her sit up. Amalik pressed a cup of water to her lips. Deanna coughed. "Where are we?" she asked, and Worf explained. He held Deanna in his arms and turned to the women.

"Give me the route to Anvik," he said. "We have to try to get there."

The women did the best they could without a map. They spoke the directions; then they drew the route in charcoal on the ice of the igloo floor.

"You will never find the way," Ilingnorak said.

"Then we'll die in the attempt," Worf said. He put on his coat and started to pull Deanna across the igloo floor toward the entrance.

"I'll take you," Amalik said. "You'll never make it otherwise."

"I'll go, too," Nenana said.

Ilingnorak was quiet for a short time. "I did not want to die in a metal building," she said, "but I'll go, too. Worse than dying there would be dying here alone."

Worf waited a minute in the igloo entrance while the women prepared for the trip. They gave Deanna and Worf scraps of caribou skin to put over their noses and mouths. Breathing through the skin was smelly, but necessary, Worf knew. They had to protect their lungs. There would be air to breathe after it was too cold for anyone to survive—oxygen would be the third gas to freeze, after carbon dioxide and ozone—but breathing it was going to get harder and harder.

Each of the women carried spears made from caribou bone. "For bears," Amalik said. "They were endangered on Earth. We gave them a second home here, but our kindness didn't change their nature."

Amalik and Nenana hoisted Deanna to a standing position and supported her with their arms. "You go ahead to break trail," Ilingnorak said to Worf. "Straight ahead, between those two rocks."

Worf trudged forward, but soon looked back and realized he was outdistancing the women. They were not strong enough to travel as fast as he could, and Deanna was in no shape to walk, even with assistance. Worf paced back to the women and lifted Deanna into his arms.

It was going to be a long eight kilometers.

PICARD STAMPED FOR a moment in the warmth of the captain's yacht docking bay on deck sixteen, while maintenance crews rushed to prepare the *Calypso* for a return trip. Picard had brought a load of children from Thule, including three from the hospital there. Those three were being rushed to sickbay.

Beverly Crusher was supervising the patient transfer. Picard looked at her and knew that she knew. He supposed that Data had told her about Worf and Deanna. She touched his arm briefly. Neither of them said anything—but then, what is there to say? Picard wondered.

ATMOSPHERE COLLAPSE: 1 HOUR, 43 MINUTES, 37 SECONDS

DEANNA DRIFTED IN and out of consciousness, but while conscious she knew she was in Worf's arms. She could taste blood on her lips, and quickly realized it was coming from her nose. The moisture was gone from the air, and as a result they all had nosebleeds. She watched Worf's breath pushing out the caribou skin around his nose and mouth when he exhaled, and she saw a slow trickle of blood run along the lower edge of the skin. A drop fell now and then onto her white seal parka. "Was it me, Worf?" she asked.

"What?"

"Did I do something to cause the crash?"

He walked a few steps before answering. "No," he said. "I will ask for you again when I next fly a shuttle."

Deanna knew he was telling the truth, and she felt relieved. "I can walk now," she said.

Worf set her down and helped her stand, then stood breathing heavily beside her.

What a burden I've become, she thought.

"We can't stop," Ilingnorak said. "Go ahead, Worf. We'll help Deanna walk. The way is downhill straight on, around that rock outcrop."

Deanna walked until she thought she'd pass out again, then she walked some more. After a time, she awakened and realized she had passed out. Worf was carrying her again.

WORF RUSHED AHEAD, breaking trail, listening to the women's directions. He estimated they had covered only five kilometers so far. When they came to a steep embankment, Worf climbed it and put Deanna down on the crest; then he pulled up each of the Inuit women. All of them rested briefly, gasping for air. The cold when they weren't moving was painful, and it hurt to breathe. Worf pulled out his phaser and fired it at a rock alongside the trail. It soon glowed red and radiated heat. The snow and ice around it melted, creating a puddle of water that would soon freeze solid again. The women hurried ahead and huddled around the rock.

They had to rest, frigid atmosphere or no. Worf knew even he had to catch his breath. He carried Deanna to the rock and sat her down on one side of it. Just a few minutes, and they would be on the move again. . . .

NONE OF THEM heard it coming. Suddenly in the dim light, barely discernible against the snow, Worf saw something white and huge rushing toward them.

Polar bear.

Worf drew his phaser, fired too quickly, and hit snow. He fired again and hit the bear—but the creature was not fazed. It stood on its back legs and roared. Amalik and Ilingnorak threw their spears. Amalik's hit the bear in the stomach, but the point barely grazed its flesh. Worf adjusted his phaser to a higher setting, hoping that being hit with a stronger charge would make the bear decide to go away.

The women crowded behind him. Worf fired again, and this time the bear was hurt. It sank back down onto all fours. With a growl, it swatted at the spear sticking out of its stomach, dislodging it, then lumbered away into the snow where none of them could see it.

Amalik ran to retrieve her spear.

"The bear will come for us again," Ilingnorak said. "It is the way of bears. They do not give up."

"I will kill it, then," Worf said, and he reset his phaser a second time.

The air was noticeably colder than it had been a short time earlier. Blood had frozen on all their lips. Worf pulled Deanna to her feet. "Hurry!" he told everyone. "And keep watch for the bear."

**ATMOSPHERE COLLAPSE:
57 MINUTES, 23 SECONDS**

THEY CAME TO a flat plain, the beginning of a short stretch of relatively easy terrain that remained between themselves and Anvik. The plain was covered with unbroken snowdrifts. It was late afternoon, almost dark, but the way ahead was clear. The snow and ice would shine even after sunset.

Worf knew Deanna was getting weaker all the time, perhaps going into shock from her broken arm and shrapnel wounds. The women did not stop talking to Deanna. They all tried to keep her walking when she could, keep her talking, keep her going. Worf wondered if with all their talking the women were convincing themselves—if they were finding reasons to hope for life again. It would be cruel if their new hope and his words about not waiting for death went for naught. He knew how limited shuttle space was, but he swore that if they made it to Anvik in time, he would find a way to save these women.

"Do you know how the stars came to be?" Ilingnorak asked Deanna.

She did not answer right away. "Clouds of hydrogen atoms get compressed by—I can't remember what," she said. "Something compresses clouds of atoms—"

"No! No. My grandmother from Earth told me it was like this: The first man and woman had six children, and polar bears hunted them. The Raven had not yet created the caribou or the seals, so there was nothing for the bears to eat but People. Whenever the man and woman thought they had found a safe place, the bears would find them, and the People had to fight them off. One by one, the bears ate the children: first the oldest boy, then two girls, then the youngest boy. Now there was only one boy and one girl left, and the first People had nowhere to hide. The bears circled the fire that night, wanting to eat the last two children. The mother became so angry that she scooped up ashes and coals from the fire and threw them at the bears. She threw them so hard, the bears were knocked into the black night sky where the coals grew and became stars, and the ashes became worlds around the stars. The People went out to hide on those worlds from the bears that still hunt us in the night."

"Star bears found this world and are taking it," Amalik said.

**ATMOSPHERE COLLAPSE:
43 MINUTES, 10 SECONDS**

DATA HAD FOUND a way to save over five hundred more lives. Two mining supply ships carried emergency-escape domes designed to fit over exits from mining shafts on asteroids and protect four people for thirty minutes. Data extended the thirty minutes to two hours with oxygen canisters from another ship. He located portable heaters on four other ships. He had one hundred forty domes, extra oxygen for each, plus eighty heaters, and he had started sending the equipment down to the surface. The shuttle pilots could rescue the people in the domes even after the atmosphere had collapsed.

"Incoming from Captain Picard," an ensign reported. Picard was returning to the *Enterprise* with his third load of refugees.

"On screen," Data said.

After a moment, the grainy image of the captain's face displayed on the main viewer. "The Oceanographic Institute in Thule has one submarine capable of carrying forty people. It's just set out with fifty-one for an undersea volcanic vent in hopes that the sea won't freeze there quickly. Transmitting coordinates of the vent. Use scanners to track them, if you can. We'll try to pull them out after atmosphere collapse."

Data quickly calculated the thickness of the ice they'd have to blast through. It would be hard, but not impossible. He explained about the mining domes to Picard.

"How many people have been lifted up so far?" Picard asked.

"Forty-five thousand two hundred thirty-one," Data said.

WORF STRUGGLED TO the top of a gentle rise—and there before them shone the lights of Anvik, bright against the dark sky. The women crowded up around him; then they all walked briskly for the city.

"When we met the bear," Worf said, "you did not act like women who want to die."

"We did not," Amalik admitted.

"We are not fighting now just to save you and Deanna," Ilingnorak said.

And they did not seem like women who wanted to die. Worf suddenly realized they never had been. They'd just been giving their places to the young.

**ATMOSPHERE COLLAPSE:
15 MINUTES, 12 SECONDS**

THERE WAS A shuttle from the *Enterprise* in Anvik. Deanna could sense its presence. Even she was moving quickly now, Worf pulling her along at his side. She did her best to keep up. It was downhill now all the way into Anvik. She wanted to live so badly—and they were so close. Surely they'd make it.

GEORDI LA FORGE STOOD back while people crowded onto the shuttle. They were trying to take at least one parent of each child who had been sent ahead on earlier flights. There was not enough space for both parents to go. Geordi looked away—the scene was too painful. He stamped his cold feet and scanned the frozen ocean. He looked up at the sky, and it was still there, for now, but not as clear as it had been. Trails of vapor misted high up: freezing carbon dioxide, he realized. He turned and looked out beyond the city—and saw a small group of people about two hundred meters away moving in his direction.

"Shuttle's full," one of the guards said.

Geordi gazed into the distance—and recognized Worf and Deanna with three Inuit women!

"Hold the doors!" he shouted.

Geordi rushed toward the group to meet them partway. "I thought you were dead!" he said.

They never stopped moving. Geordi took Deanna's other arm and helped Worf trot toward the shuttle with her.

"Why are all these people still here?" one of the women

shouted from behind them.

"The only shuttle's full!" Geordi shouted.

The women stopped. And then Worf stopped.

"We have to go!" Geordi shouted.

"I give my place to one of you," Worf told the women.

"Go!" Ilingnorak shouted at him. "You are young—life itself is reason enough for living!"

The women sat in the snow and held onto each other. Tendrils of frozen carbon dioxide vapor were swirling around the snowdrifts away from the heat of the city.

Geordi explained that another shuttle had brought down some mining domes, and the domes were being given out inside the spaceport terminal. "See if you can get one," he told the women. "We'll pick you up on our next trip." He ran for the shuttle, pulling Deanna with him.

Worf walked back and drew Ilingnorak to her feet. "You rescued a Klingon from freezing to death," he told her. "I will not leave you to freeze now. Come with me—all of you!" And he ran for the terminal, pulling Ilingnorak after him. Amalik and Nenana ran behind them.

Once more he was giving them hope, Worf thought.

Once more he hoped it wasn't mere cruelty.

"Worf!" Geordi shouted from the shuttle doorway. Deanna was already inside.

"Go!" Worf shouted back. "I am helping these women!"

Geordi turned, and the shuttle doors closed.

Worf let go of Ilingnorak and ran as hard as he could to the terminal doorway. Hundreds of people milled about, most having resigned themselves to their fates. A few were going after the mining domes, reasoning that the scant hope they offered was better than none. Worf shoved his way inside the terminal and took a dome and an oxygen canister.

"We have no heaters left!" the woman behind the counter shouted at him. "You'll freeze inside that dome."

"I will take my chances," he said. He rushed back outside to where the Inuit women were waiting for him.

He burned away a small circle of snow in an explosion of steam that dusted them in frost. He shoved the escape dome down onto the rock and set it off. The seal melted against the rock, making an airtight enclosure. Worf opened the hatch, and heat from the sealing process rushed out. Worf pulled aside the caribou skin and breathed in a lungful of the heated air.

"Get inside quickly," Worf ordered the women.

Nenana started crawling through the hatch. Someone set off a dome near theirs, and it sputtered and steamed on the surface but did not create a seal.

"Find a rock we can heat with my phaser," Worf told Amalik, and he ran to the dome that had not sealed. "Stand back," he told the people there. The air was misty with carbon dioxide vapor. He fired his phaser at the seal and melted it against the rock. He walked slowly around the dome, firing carefully to create a seal without puncturing the dome. By the time he finished, he could hardly breathe. But he hurried to another dome having trouble and sealed it for the people there.

Amalik tossed a rock into their dome and crawled inside.

She called out for Worf.

For a moment he could not move. He gasped for air, feeling as though every breath was ripping at his lungs. He willed his legs toward his dome, ignoring the pain that came from them. He kicked the hatch, Ilingnorak opened it, and he fell into the opening.

The women pulled him inside and sealed the hatch. Worf could not move. "Use my phaser to heat the rock," he said hoarsely.

Ilingnorak took the phaser and fired it at the rock. It soon glowed, but the heat from it could not entirely drive back the cold.

"My back is freezing," Nenana said.

Worf watched the women turn their backs to the heat, then turn around to face it, then turn their backs to it again. After a moment, he sat up and held his hands over the rock. He leaned his face down over it.

"I can't get warm," Nenana said.

The floor of the shelter, which rested only inches above the ground, grew colder and colder. Worf wished they had a covering to put on it.

Amalik and Nenana were both crying now and rubbing themselves vigorously. Worf heated the rock again. "We are all suffering," he said. "But we must calm ourselves to conserve air."

The women made themselves stop crying. When they were quiet, Amalik spoke softly. "The star bears are coming for us," she said.

"We will fight them," Worf replied.

THEY HAD HEATED the rock so many times that it had cracked in two, and part of it had melted down into the floor of the dome. Still, they kept it glowing. In addition to the heat, it provided a bit of light; outside the dome, the sun had set. After a time, they heard a soft patter against the dome, then a hard rain. Ozone, Worf knew. The rain let up, but after ten minutes it began again. Rain slammed against the dome in a galestorm. Oxygen, this time.

Ilingnorak held his hand. "You are brave, Klingon," she said. "And loyal—all the best things I've read about your people."

Worf said nothing. They listened to the oxygen rain. After a time, Ilingnorak spoke again. "You love her," she said. "And surely she will love you. That makes us all happy."

Worf checked their supply of air. He heated the rock again. He listened to the gases of the atmosphere rain down in the darkness and freeze around them.

Love Deanna? he wondered.

What other name was there for what he felt?

ATMOSPHERE: COLLAPSED

IT WAS AN *Enterprise* shuttle that came for them. Worf listened to the crew open domes and rescue the people near them. He listened to the crunch of footsteps around their dome. He heard them burn away the layers of gassy ice above their hatch and attach a crawl tube. He listened for the hatch

Amalik spoke softly. "The star bears are coming for us," she said.

on the shuttle end to open, and the slam of it echoed down the tube. Then their hatch twisted open.

"Hurry! This way!" a man said, and he began crawling away, back toward the shuttle.

"We need help!" Worf called.

The man recognized the familiar voice. He came back and shone a light into the dome. "Lieutenant Worf!" he shouted. Then he called back to the shuttle on his communicator: "I've found Worf!"

The man extended his arms into the dome to help its occupants get into the tube. Worf helped Nenana up, then Amalik. Ilingnorak kissed Worf and crawled after her friends. Worf followed them all.

FOR TWO DAYS, Worf could not move. Dr. Crusher had to regenerate forty percent of his lungs. His throat and the lining of his nostrils were also damaged. He had frostbite on his feet, hands, and face, but Dr. Crusher thought it would leave few scars.

But Worf had other scars, not visible. As he lay in his bed, he kept thinking about the people who hadn't gotten into domes. He felt a deep sorrow for them, even as he respected them for their courage in the face of death. He did not know if he would ever be able to forget the sacrifices of the brave people of Nunanavik.

Dr. Crusher helped Deanna to Worf's side on the second day. "How many times did you save my life?" Deanna asked him. She leaned down and kissed his forehead. "Thank you," she whispered.

Worf held onto her hand. After she left, he touched the place where Deanna had kissed him.

PICARD VISITED WORF each day of his recovery. On the first day, he looked at the bandages from the frostbite and the stitches that closed the shrapnel wounds on Worf's neck and face, and he realized those were only the dressings and stitches he could see. "You are hurt, my friend," Picard said.

I am hurting, Worf thought, but not in the way you imagine. He quieted his thoughts of those who had died, and then found himself able to talk. "These wounds are nothing," he said.

Picard was quiet for a time. "I've met Amalik, Nenana, and Ilingnorak," he said. "They are healing, and should live. From what Ilingnorak tells me, you will figure prominently in Inuit legend, if she has anything to say about it."

Worf allowed himself a slight smile, though it hurt to move his face like that. "Those women would be a credit to any people," he said.

"I am proud they are descended from Earth," Picard said.

"When we are healed, I will let them know how I honor them."

"I think they know," Picard said. "How could they not?"

After a time, Picard left. The crew of the *Enterprise* could rest now. They had done everything possible. The crew of the *Carpathia* was bringing up the ten thousand people in the

pressure domes. Another ship was implementing a plan to rescue the people in the submarine. The *Enterprise* waited in case its tired crew needed to provide emergency assistance. Data calculated that their combined efforts had saved more than sixty-five thousand lives.

In a few days, Dr. Crusher removed the dressings from Worf's hands. Now that he was able to touch and feel with his hands again, Worf found his thoughts drifting back to when he had held Deanna in his arms.

She had felt so small. . . . When they'd been falling in the paraglider, he had hung on to her so tightly he'd been afraid she would break. That she had felt small and fragile surprised him, because she had always seemed so strong. Her strength was what originally had attracted him to her, after all. But her strength did not come from her stature. He thought of the Inuit women. Stature—or youth—did not give them strength, either. They had neither of those.

But they had something more important, or rather they understood something more important. Ilingnorak had told him in Anvik to go on for two reasons: first, because he was young. But Worf thought that, where life was concerned, age did not matter. What mattered was the second reason. It was what had given the women hope again and again. It was what had given the people left in Anvik the courage to crawl into the domes and struggle to live.

Life itself is reason enough for living.

It always is, Worf thought. Young or old, it always is. ♣



about the author

M. Shayne Bell grew up on a ranch on the Snake River in Idaho, a place with hundreds of acres of forests, islands in the river, and wildlife everywhere. His family loved to read and his home was filled with books. One of his earliest memories as a child was of his mother holding him on her lap and reading science fiction to him.

His short fiction has been published in AMAZING Stories, Asimov's, and The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, to name only a few. He has had stories in each of the Star Wars anthologies, and his short story "Mrs. Lincoln's China" was a 1995 Hugo Award finalist.

Bell's work, including poetry and a novel—Nicoji, published by Baen Books in 1990—has been translated into six languages.

Bell and his partner currently live in Salt Lake City, Utah.



about the illustrator

Russell Walks has spent most of his life in Montana. Currently working on a children's book about a boy, his dog, and an awfully big adventure, he spends his days drawing, painting, and counting himself lucky that he actually gets paid for doing what he loves. This is his first work for AMAZING Stories.



HATCHING THE PHOENIX

BY FREDERIK POHL

P R E F A C E

When Frederik Pohl's novel Gateway appeared in 1977, it won most of the awards the field of science fiction had to offer, including the Hugo, the Nebula, the Campbell (the juried one for best novel of the year, not the one for best new writer), the French Apollo, and the Yugoslavian Visija. It told of a wonderful asteroid, Gateway, in which a long-gone spacefaring race called the Heechee had abandoned a stable of faster-than-light spacecraft. Hundreds of thousands of years after they were left there, they still worked. Human beings who got into one and started it up were flown to far-off parts of the galaxy, but there was a catch. Each destination was preprogrammed by the vanished Heechee. The human adventurers who flew in one of the craft might find a planet containing treasure troves of Heechee technology—but they were just as likely to wind up within the photosphere of a star or meandering helplessly in interstellar space.

For those who would like to share the experience of the Gateway explorers, two video games are based on Pohl's work: Frederik Pohl's Gateway and Gateway Two: Homeworld, both released by Legend Entertainment Co. (www.Legendent.com).

In the four sequels to the original novel—Beyond the Blue Event Horizon, Heechee Rendezvous, The Annals of the Heechee, and The Gateway Trip—human explorers track down the Heechee where they are hiding, in the great black hole at the core of our galaxy, learn why they ran away and hid, and begin the process of converting Heechee technology to their own uses. But the saga is not over. There are more stories still to be told ... including "Hatching the Phoenix."

Chapter I

WE WERE ONLY about half a day out when we crossed the wavefront from the Crab supernova. I wouldn't even have noticed it, but my shipmind, Hypatia, is programmed to notice things that might interest me. So she asked me if I wanted to take a look at it, and I did.

Of course I'd already seen the star blow up two or three times in simulations, but as a flesh-and-blood human being I like reality better than simulations—most of the time, anyway. Hypatia had already turned on the Heechee screen, but it showed nothing other than the pebbly gray blur that the Heechee use. Hypatia can read those things, but I can't, so she changed the phase for me.

ILLUSTRATION BY VINCENT DI FATE

What I was seeing then was a field of stars, looking exactly like any other field of stars to me. It's a lack in me, I'm sure, but as far as I'm concerned every star looks like all the other stars in the sky, at least until you get close enough to it to see it as a sun. So I had to ask her, "Which one is it?"

She said, "You can't see it yet. We don't have that much magnification. But keep your eyes open. Wait a moment. Another moment. Now, there it is."

She didn't have to say that. I could see it for myself. Suddenly a point of light emerged and got brighter, and brighter still, until it outshone everything else on the screen. It actually made me squint. "It happens pretty fast," I said.

"Well, not really *that* fast, Klara. Our vector velocity, relative to the star, is quite a lot faster than light, so we're speeding things up. Also, we're catching up with the wavefront, so we're seeing it all in reverse. It'll be gone soon."

And a moment later it was. Just as the star was brightest of all, it unexploded itself. It became a simple star again, so unremarkable that I couldn't even pick it out. Its planets were unscorched again, their populations, if any, not yet whiffed into plasma. "All right," I said, somewhat impressed but not enough to want Hypatia to know it, "turn the screen off and let's get back to work."

Hypatia sniffed—she has built herself a whole repertoire of human behaviors that I had never had programmed into her. She said darkly, "We'd better, if we want to be able to pay all the bills for this thing. Do you have any idea what this is *costing*?"

Of course, she wasn't serious about that. I have problems, but being able to pay my bills isn't one of them.

I wasn't always this solvent. When I was a kid on that chunk of burned-out hell they call the planet Venus, driving an airbody around its baked, bleak surface for the tourists all day and trying not to spend any of my pay all night, what I wanted most was to have money. I wasn't hoping for a whole lot of money. I just wanted enough money so that I could afford Full Medical and a place to live that didn't stink of rancid seafood. I wasn't dreaming on any vast scale.

It didn't work out that way, though. I never did have exactly that much money. First I had none at all and no real hopes of ever getting any. Then I had much, much more than that, and I found out something about having a lot of money. When you have the kind of money that's spelled M*O*N*E*Y, it's like having a kitten in the house. The money wants you to play

with it. You can try to leave it alone, but if you do it'll be crawling into your lap and nibbling at your chin for attention. You don't have to give in to what the money wants. You can just push it away and go about your business, but then God knows what mischief it'll get into if you do, and anyway then where's the fun of having it?

So most of the way out to the PhoenixCorp site, Hypatia and I played with my money. That is, I played with it while Hypatia kept score. She remembers what I own better than I do—that's her nature, being the sort of task she was designed to do—and she's always full of suggestions about what investments I should dump or hold or what new ventures I should get into.

The key word there is "suggestions." I don't have to do what Hypatia says. Sometimes I don't. As a general rule I follow Hypatia's suggestions about four times out of five. The fifth time I do something different, just to let her know that I'm the

one who makes the decisions here. I know that's not smart, and it generally costs me money when I do. But that's all right. I have plenty to spare.

There's a limit to how long I'm willing to go on tickling the money's tummy, though. When I had just about reached that point, Hypatia put down her pointer and waved the graphics displays away. She had made herself optically visible to humor me, because I like to see the person I'm talking to, wearing her fifth-century robes and coronet of rough-cut rubies and all, and she gave me an inquiring look. "Ready to take a little break, Klara?" she asked. "Do you want something to eat?"

Well, I was, and I did. She knew that perfectly well. She's continually monitoring my body, because that's one of the other tasks she's designed to do, but I like to keep my free will going there, too. "Actually," I said, "I'd

rather have a drink. How are we doing for time?"

"Right on schedule, Klara. We'll be there in ten hours or so." She didn't move—that is, her simulation didn't move—but I could hear the clink of ice going into a glass in the galley. "I've been accessing the PhoenixCorp shipmind. If you want to see what's going on . . . ?"

"Do it," I said, but she was already doing it. She waved again—pure theater, of course, but Hypatia's full of that—and we got a new set of graphics. As the little serving cart rolled in and stopped just by my right hand, we were looking through PhoenixCorp's own visuals, and what we were looking at was a dish-shaped metal spiderweb, with little things crawling across it. I could form no precise picture of its size, because there was nothing in the space around it to compare it with. But I didn't have to. I knew it was big.

"Have one for yourself," I said, lifting my glass.

She gave me that patient, exasperated look and let it pass. Sometimes she does simulate having a simulated drink with me

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while I have a real one, but this time she was in her schoolteacher mode. “As you can see, Klara,” she informed me, “the shipment of optical mirror pieces has arrived, and the drones are putting them in place on the parabolic dish. They’ll be getting first light from the planet in an hour or so, but I don’t think you’ll care about seeing it. The resolution will be poor until they get everything put together; that should take about eighteen hours. Then we should have optimal resolution to observe the planet.”

“For four days,” I said, taking a pull at my glass.

She gave me a different look—still the schoolteacher, but now a schoolteacher putting up with a particularly annoying student. “Hey, Klara. You knew there wouldn’t be much time. It wasn’t my idea to come all the way out here anyway. We could have watched the whole thing from your island.”

I swallowed the rest of my nightcap and stood up. “That’s not how I wanted to do it,” I told her. “The trouble with you simulations is that you don’t appreciate what reality is like. Wake me up an hour before we get there.”

And I headed for my stateroom, with my big and round and unoccupied bed. I didn’t want to chat with Hypatia just then. The main reason I had kept her busy giving me financial advice so long was that it prevented her from giving me advice on the thing she was always trying to talk me into, or that one other big thing that I really needed to make up my mind about, and couldn’t.

THE CART WITH my black coffee and fresh-squeezed orange juice—make that quote “fresh-squeezed” unquote orange juice, but Hypatia was too good at her job for me to be able to tell the difference—was right by my bed when she woke me up. “Ninety minutes to linkup,” she said cheerily, “and a very good morning to you. Shall I start your shower?”

I said, “Um.” Ninety minutes is not a second too long for me to sit and swallow coffee, staring into space, before I have to do anything as energetic as getting into a shower. But then I looked into the wall mirror by the bed, didn’t like what I saw, and decided I’d better spruce myself up a little bit.

I was never what you’d call a pretty woman. My eyebrows were a lot too heavy, for one thing. Once or twice over the years I’d had the damn things thinned down to fashion-model proportions, just to see if it would help any. It didn’t. I’d even messed around with my bone structure, more cheekbones, less jaw, to try to look a little less masculine. It just made me look weak-faced. For a couple of years I’d gone blonde, then tried redhead once but checked it out and made them change it back before I left the beauty parlor. They were all mistakes. They didn’t work. Whenever I looked at myself, whatever the cosmetologists and the medical fixer-uppers had done, I could still see the old Gelle-Klara Moynlin hiding there behind all the trim. So screw it. For the last little while I’d gone natural.

Well, pretty natural, anyway. I didn’t want to look *old*.

I didn’t, of course. By the time I was bathed and my hair was fixed and I was wearing a simple dress that showed off my pretty good legs, actually, I looked as good as I ever had. “Almost there,” Hypatia called. “You better hang onto something. I have to match velocities, and it’s a tricky job.” She sounded annoyed, as she usually does when I give her some-

thing hard to do. She does it, of course, but she complains a lot. “Faster than light I can do, slower than light I can do, but when you tell me to match velocity with somebody who’s doing exactly *c* you’re into some pretty weird effects, so—Oh, sorry.”

“You should be,” I told her, because that last lurch had nearly made me spill my third cup of coffee. “Hypatia? What do you think, the pearls or the cameo?”

She did that fake two- or three-second pause, as though she really needed any time at all to make a decision, before she gave me the verdict. “I’d wear the cameo. Only whores wear pearls in the daytime.”

So of course I decided to wear the pearls. She sighed but didn’t comment. “All right,” she said, opening the port. “We’re docked. Mind the step, and I’ll keep in touch.”

I nodded and stepped over the seals into the PhoenixCorp mother ship.

There wasn’t any real “step.” What there was was a sharp transition from the comfortable one gee I kept in my own ship to the gravityless environment of the PhoenixCorp ship. My stomach did a quick little flip-flop of protest, but I grabbed a hold-on bar and looked around.

I don’t know what I’d expected to find, maybe something like the old Gateway asteroid. PhoenixCorp had done itself a lot more lavishly than that, and I began to wonder if I hadn’t maybe been a touch too open-handed with the financing. The place certainly didn’t smell like Gateway. Instead of Gateway’s sour, ancient fuf, it had the wetly sweet smell of a greenhouse. That was because there were vines and ferns and flowers growing in pots all around the room—spreading out in all directions, because of that zero-gee environment, and if I’d thought about that ahead of time, I wouldn’t have worn a skirt. The only human being in sight was a tall, nearly naked black man who was hanging by one toe from a wall bracket, exercising his muscles with one of those metal-spring gadgets. (“Humphrey Mason-Manley,” Hypatia whispered in my ear. “He’s the archeologist-anthropologist guy from the British Museum.”) Without breaking his rhythm, Humphrey gave me a look of annoyance.

“What are you doing here, miss? No visitors are permitted. This is private property, and—”

Then he got a better look at me and his expression changed. Not to welcoming exactly, but to what I’d call sort of unwillingly impressed. “Oh, crikey,” he said. “You’re Gelle-Klara Moynlin, are you not? That’s a bit different. Welcome aboard, I guess.”

Chapter 11

IT WASN’T the most affable greeting I’d ever had. However, when Humphrey Mason-Manley woke up the head engineer for me, she turned out to be a lot more courteous. She didn’t have to be, either. Although I had put up the seed money to get the

project started, PhoenixCorp was set up as a non-profit institution, owned by nobody but itself. I wasn't even on the board.

The boss engineer's name, Hypatia whispered to me, was June Thaddeus Terple—*Doctor* Terple. I didn't really need the reminder. Terple and I had met before, though only by screen, when she was trying to scare up money for this venture and somebody had given her my name. In person she was taller than I'd thought. She looked to be about the age I looked to be myself, which is to say, charitably, thirtyish. She was wearing a kind of string bikini, plus a workman's belt of little pouches around her waist so she could keep stuff in it. She took me into her office, which was a sort of wedge-shaped chamber with nothing much visible in it but handholds on the walls and a lot more of those flowering plants. "Sorry I wasn't there to meet you, Dr. Moynlin," she said.

"I'm not a doctor of anything, except honorary, and Klara's good enough."

She bobbed her head. "Anyway, of course you're welcome here any time. I guess you wanted to see for yourself how we're coming along."

"Well, I did want that, yes. I also wanted to set something up, if you don't mind." That was me returning courtesy for courtesy, however unnecessary it was in either direction. "Do you know who Wilhelm Tarch is?"

She thought for a moment. "No."

So much for his galaxywide fame. I explained. "Bill's a kind of roving reporter. He has a program that goes out all over, even to the Heechee in the Core. It's sort of a travelogue. He visits exciting and colorful places and reports on them for the stay-at-homes." He was also my present main lover, but there wasn't any reason to mention that to Terple; she would figure it out for herself fast enough.

"And he wants to do PhoenixCorp?"

"If you don't mind," I said again. "I did clear it with the board."

She grinned at me. "So you did, but I sort of lost track of it. We've been deploying the drones, so it's been kind of busy." She shook herself. "Anyway, Hans tells me your shipmind displayed the actual supernova explosion to you on the way out."

"That's right, she did." In my ear Hypatia was whispering that Hans was the name of their shipmind, as though I couldn't figure that out for myself.

"And I suppose you know what it looks like from Earth now?"

"Well, sort of."

I could see her assessing how much "sort of" amounted to, and deciding to be diplomatic to the money person. "It wouldn't hurt to take another look. Hans! Telescopic view from Earth, please."

She was looking toward one end of her office. It disappeared, and in its place we were looking out at a blotchy patch of light. "That's it. It's called the Crab Nebula. Of course, they named it that before they really knew what it was, but you can see where they got the name." I agreed that it did look a little like some sort of deformed crab, and Terple went on. "The nebula itself is just the gases and stuff that the supernova threw off, a thousand years or so later. I don't know if you can make it out, but there's a little spot in the middle of it that's the Crab pulsar. That's all that's left of the star. Now let's look at the way it was before it went super."

Hans wiped the nebula away, and we were looking into the same deep, black space Hypatia had shown me already. There were the same zillion stars hanging there, but as the shipmind zoomed the picture closer, one extraordinarily bright one appeared. "Bright" didn't do it justice. It was a blazing golden yellow, curiously fuzzy. It wasn't really hot. It couldn't be; the simulation was only optical. But I could almost feel its heat on my face.

"I don't see any planet," I offered.

"Oh, you will, once we get all the optical segments in place." Then she interrupted herself. "I forgot to ask. Would you like a cup of tea or something?"

"Thanks, no. Nothing right this minute." I was peering at the star. "I thought it would be brighter," I said, a little disappointed.

"Oh, it will be, Klara. That's what we're building that five-hundred-kilometer mirror for. Right now we're just getting the gravitational lensing from the black hole we're using—there's a little camera in the mirror. I don't know if you know much about black holes, but—oh, shit," she interrupted herself, suddenly stricken. "You do know, don't you? I mean, after you

were stuck in one for thirty or forty years . . ."

She looked as though she had inadvertently caused me great pain. She hadn't. I was used to that sort of reaction. People rarely brought up the subject of black holes in my presence, on the general principle that you don't talk about rope when there's been a hanging in the house. But the time I was trapped in one of them was far back in the past. It had gone like a flash for me in the black hole's time dilation, whatever the elapsed time was on the outside, and I wasn't sensitive about it.

On the other hand, I wasn't interested in discussing it one more damn time, either, so I just said, "My black hole didn't look like that. It was a creepy kind of pale blue."

Terple recovered quickly. She gave me a wise nod of the head. "That would have been Cerenkov radiation. Yours must have been what they call a naked singularity. This one's different. It's wrapped up in its own ergosphere and you can't see a thing. Most black holes produce a lot of radiation—not from themselves, from the gases and stuff they're swallowing—but this

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one has already swallowed everything around it. Anyway." She paused to recollect her train of thought. Then she nodded. "I was telling you about the gravitational lensing. Hans?"

She didn't say what she wanted from Hans, but evidently he could figure it out for himself. The stars disappeared, and a sort of wall of misty white appeared in front of us. Terple poked at it here and there with a finger, drawing a little picture for me:

"That little dot on the left, that's the Crabber planet we want to study. The circle's the black hole. The arc on the right is our mirror, which is right at the point of convergence—where the gravitational lensing from the black hole gives us the sharpest image. And the little dot next to it is us, at the Cassegrain focus of the mirror. I didn't show the Crabber sun—actually we have to avoid aiming the camera at it, because it could burn out our optics. Am I making sense so far?"

"So far," I agreed.

She gave me another of those assessing looks, then said, "We'll actually be doing our observing by looking toward the mirror, not toward the Crab planet. There too we'll have to block out the star itself, or we won't see the actual planet at all, but that's just another of the things we'll be adjusting. Then we'll actually be looking diametrically away from the planet in order to observe it."

I hadn't been able to resist the temptation with Hypatia, and I couldn't now with June Terple. "For four or five days," I said in my friendliest voice.

I guess the tone wasn't friendly enough. She looked nettled. "Listen, we didn't put the damn black hole where it is. It took us two years of searching to find one in the right position. There's a neutron star that we could've used. Orbitwise it was a better deal because it would have given us nearly eighty years to observe, but it's just a damn neutron star. It wouldn't have given us anywhere the same magnification, because a neutron star just doesn't have anywhere near as much mass as a black hole, so the gravitational lensing would've been a lot less. We'll get a lot more detail with our black hole. Anyway," she added, "once we've observed from here we'll move this whole lash-up to the neutron star for whatever additional data we can get—I mean, uh, if that seems advisable, we will."

What she meant by that was if I was willing to pay for it. Well, I probably was. The capital costs were paid; it would only mean meeting their payroll for another eighty years or so.

But I wasn't ready to make that commitment. To take her mind off it, I said, "I thought we were supposed to have almost thirty days of observing right here."

She looked glum. "Radio observing. That's why we built the mesh dish. But it turns out there's no radio coming from the Crabber planet at all, so we had to get the mirror plates to convert it to optical. Took us over three weeks, which is why we lost so much observing time."

"I see," I said. "No radio signals. So there might not be any civilization there to observe, anyway."

She bit her lip. "We know definitely that there's *life* there. Or was, anyway. It's one of the planets the Heechee surveyed long ago, and there were advanced living organisms there at the time—pretty primitive, sure, but they certainly looked as though they had the potential to evolve."

"The *potential* to evolve, right. But whether they did or not

we just don't know."

She didn't answer that. She just sighed. Then she said, "As long as you're here, would you like a look around?"

"If I won't be in the way," I said.

OF COURSE I WAS in the way. June Terple didn't let it show, but some of the others barely gave me the courtesy of looking up when we were introduced. There were eight of them altogether, with names like Julia Ibarruru and Mark Rohrbeck and Humphrey Mason-Manley and Oleg Kekuskian and—well, I didn't have to try to retain them all; Hypatia would clue me as needed. Humphrey Mason-Manley was the guy who'd been building his pecs when I came in. Julia was the one who was floating in a harness surrounded by fifteen or twenty 3-D icons that she was busy poking at and glowering at and poking at again, and she gave me no more than a quick and noncommittal nod. If my name meant anything to her, or to most of the others, they didn't show any signs of being impressed. Especially Rohrbeck and Kekuskian didn't, because they were sound asleep in their harnesses when we peeked in on them, and Terple had a finger to her lips. "Third shift," she whispered when we'd closed the flaps on their cubicles and moved away. "They'll be waking up for dinner in a little while, but let's let them get their sleep. And there's only one other. Let's go find her."

On the way to that one other member of the crew, Hypatia was whispering bits of biography in my ear. Kekuskian was the quite elderly and bisexual astrophysicist. Rohrbeck the quite young and deeply depressed program designer, whose marriage had just come painfully apart. And the one remaining person was . . .

Was a Heechee.

I didn't have to be told that. Once you've seen any one Heechee, you know what they all look like: skeletally thin front to back, squarish, skull-like faces, their data pod hanging between their legs where, if they were male, their balls should be, and if female (as this one turned out to be), there shouldn't be anything much at all. Her name, Terple said, was Starminster, and as we entered her chamber she was working at a set of icons of her own. But as soon as she heard my name she wiped them and barreled over to me to shake my hand. "You are very famous among us in the Core, Gelle-Klara Moynlin," she informed me, hanging on to my hand for support. "Because of your Moynlin Citizen Ambassadors, you see. When your Rebecca Shapiro person came to our city, she was invited to stay with the father of my husband's family, which is where I met her. She was quite informative about human beings; indeed, it was because of her that I volunteered at once to come out. Do you know her?"

I tried to remember Rebecca Shapiro. I had put up grant money for a good many batches of recruits since I funded the program, and she would have had to be one of the earliest of them. Starminster saw my uncertainty and tried to be helpful. "Young woman. Very sad. She sang music composed by your now-dead Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart for our people, which I almost came to enjoy."

"Oh, right, *that* Rebecca," I said, not very honestly. By then I'd paid the fare to the Core for—what?—at least two or three hundred Rebeccas or Carloses or Janes who volunteered to be

Citizen Ambassadors to the Heechee in the Core because they had lives that were a shambles. That was a given. If their lives hadn't been, why would they want to leave the people and places they wouldn't ever come back to?

Because, of course, the Core was time-dilated, like any black hole. I knew what that meant. When you were time-dilated in the Core, where a couple of centuries of outside time went by every day, the problems you left behind got really old really fast. Time dilation was better than suicide—though, when you came to think of it, actually a kind of reverse suicide is pretty much what it was. You didn't die yourself, but every troublesome person you'd ever known did while you were gone.

I wish all those Citizen Ambassadors of mine well. I hope it all works out for them . . . but being in a black hole hadn't done a thing for me.

ONCE I'D MET all the people on the PhoenixCorp ship, there wasn't much else to see. I had misjudged my budget-watchers. Terple hadn't been that spendthrift after all. If you didn't count the opulent plantings—and they were there primarily to keep the air good—the PhoenixCorp ship actually was a pretty bare-bones kind of spacecraft. There were the sleeping quarters for the help, and some common rooms—the big one I'd come into when I first entered, plus a sort of dining room with beverage dispensers and netting next to the hold-ons to keep the meals from flying away, a couple of little rooms for music or virtuals when the people wanted some recreation. The rest of it was storage and, of course, all the machinery and instrumentation PhoenixCorp needed to do its job. Terple didn't show me any of the hardware. I didn't expect her to. That's the shipmind's business, and that sort of thing stays sealed away where no harm can come to it. So, unless somebody had been foolish enough to open up a lot of compartments that were meant to stay closed, there wouldn't have been anything to see.

When we were finished, she finally insisted on that cup of tea—really that capsule of tea, that is—and while we were drinking it, holding with one hand to the hold-ons, she said, “That's about it, Klara. Oh, wait a minute. I haven't actually introduced you to our shipmind, have I? Hans? Say hello to Ms. Moynlin.”

A deep, pleasant male voice said, “Hello, Ms. Moynlin. Welcome aboard. We've been hoping you'd visit us.”

I said hello back to him and left it at that. I don't particularly like chatting with machine intelligences, except my own. I finished my tea, slid the empty capsule into its slot, and said, “Well, I'll get out of your way. I want to get back to my own ship for a bit anyway.”

Terple nodded and didn't ask why. “We're going to have dinner in about an hour. Would you like to join us? Hans is a pretty good cook.”

That sounded like as good an idea as any, so I told her that would be fine.

Then, as she was escorting me to the docking port, she gave me a sidewise look. “Listen,” she said, “I'm sorry we bombed out on the radio search. It doesn't necessarily mean that the Crabbers never got civilized. After all, if somebody had scanned Earth any time before the twentieth century, they wouldn't have heard any radio signals there, either, but the human race was

fully evolved by then.”

“I know that, June.”

“Yes.” She cleared her throat. “Do you mind if I ask you a question?”

I said, “Of course not,” meaning that she could ask anything she wanted to, but whether or what I chose to answer was another matter entirely.

“Well, you put a lot of money into getting Phoenix started, just on the chance that there might have been an intelligent race there that got fried when their sun went super. What I'm wondering is why.”

The answer to that was simple enough. I mean, what's the point of being just about the richest woman in the universe if you don't have a little fun with your money now and then? But I didn't say that to her. I just said, “What else do I have to do?”

Chapter III

WELL, I DID have things to do. Lots of them, though most of them weren't very important.

The only one that was really important—to me—was overseeing the little island off Tahiti that I live on when I'm home. It's a nice place, the way I've fixed it up. Most of my more-or-less family is there, and when I'm away I really miss them.

Then there are other important things, such as spending some time with Bill Tartch, who is a fairly sweet man, not to mention all the others like Bill Tartch who have come along over the years. Or such things as all the stuff I can buy with my money, plus figuring out what to do with the power that that kind of money gives. Put them all together, I had *plenty* to do with my life. And I had plenty of life to look forward to, too, especially if I let Hypatia talk me into immortality.

So why wasn't I looking forward to it?

When I came back into my ship, Hypatia was waiting for me—visible, in full 3-D simulation, lounging draped Roman-style on the love seat in the main cabin and fully dressed in her fifth-century robes.

“So how did you like your investment?” she asked sociably.

“Tell you in a minute,” I said, going to the head and closing the door behind me. Of course, a closed door makes no real difference with Hypatia. She can see me wherever I am on the ship, and no doubt does, but as long as a machine intelligence acts and looks human, I want it to pretend to observe human courtesies.

Hitting the head was the main reason I'd come back to my ship just then. I don't like peeing in free fall, in those awful toilets they have. Hypatia keeps ours at a suitable gravity for my comfort, like the rest of the ship. Besides, it makes her nervous if I use any toilets outside the ship, because she likes to rum-

mage through my excretions to see if I'm staying healthy.

Which she had been doing while I was in the head. When I came out, she didn't seem to have moved, but she said, "Are you really going to eat their food?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"You've been running a little high on polyglycerides. Better you let me cook for you."

Teasing her, I said, "June Terple says Hans is a better cook."

"She said he's a *good* cook," she corrected me, "but so am I. I've been accessing him, by the way, so if there's anything you'd like to know about the crew. . . ."

"Not about the crew, but Star minder said something about a Rebecca Shapiro. Who was she?"

"That data is not in the Phoenix shipmind's stores, Klara," she said, reproving me. "However. . . ."

She whited out a corner of my lounge and displayed a face on it while she gave me a capsule biography of Rebecca Shapiro. Rebecca had been a dramatic soprano with a brilliant operatic future ahead of her until she got her larynx crushed in a plane crash. They'd repaired it well enough for most purposes, but she was never going to be able to sing "The Queen of the Night" again. So, with her life on Earth ruined, Rebecca had signed up for my program. "Any other questions?" Hypatia said.

"Not about Rebecca, but I've been wondering why they call their shipmind Hans."

"Oh, that was Mark Rohrbeck's idea; he wanted to name him after some old computer pioneer. The name doesn't matter, though, does it? I mean, why did you decide to call me Hypatia?"

"Because Hypatia of Alexandria was a smart, snotty bitch," I told her. "Like you."

"Humph," she said.

"As well as being the first great woman scientist," I added, because Hypatia always likes to talk about herself.

"The first *known* one," she corrected. "Who knows how many there were whose accomplishments didn't manage to survive? Women didn't get much of a break in your ancient meat world—or, for that matter, now."

"You were supposed to be beautiful, too," I reminded her. "And you died a virgin anyway."

"By choice, Klara. Even that old Hypatia didn't care much for all that messy meat stuff. And I didn't just die. I was brutally murdered. It was a cold wet spring in A.D. 450, and a gang of those damn Nitrian monks tore me to shreds because I wasn't a Christian. Anyway," she finished, "you're the one who picked my identity. If you wanted me to be someone else, you could have given me a different one."

She had me grinning by then. "I still can," I reminded her. "Maybe something like Joan of Arc?"

She shuddered fastidiously at the idea of being a Christian

instead of a gods-fearing Roman pagan and changed the subject. "Would you like me to put a call through to Mr. Tartch now?"

Well, I would and I wouldn't. I had unfinished business to settle with Bill Tartch, but I wasn't quite ready to settle it, so I shook my head. "I've been wondering about these extinct people we're trying to resurrect. Have you got any Heechee records of the planet that I haven't seen yet?"

"You bet. More than you'll ever want to watch."

"So show me some."

"Sure thing, boss," she said, and disappeared, and all at once I was standing on an outcropping of rock, looking down on a bright, green valley where some funny-looking animals were moving around.

THAT WAS THE difference between PhoenixCorp's major simulations and mine. Mine cost more.

Theirs were good enough for working purposes, because they showed you pretty much anything you wanted to see, but mine put you right in the middle of it. Mine were full sensory systems, too, so I could smell and feel as well as I could see and hear. As I stood there, a warm breeze ruffled my hair, and I smelled a distinct reek of smoke. "Hey, Hypatia," I said, a little surprised. "Have these people discovered fire?"

"Not to use, no," she murmured in my ear. "Must've been a lightning strike up in the hills from the storm."

"What storm?"

"The one that just passed. Don't you see everything's wet?"

Not on my rock, it wasn't. The sun overhead was big and bright and very hot. It had already baked the rock dry, but I could see that the jumble of dark green vines at the base of my rock was

still dripping, and when I turned around I could see a splotch of burning vegetation on the distant hill.

The valley was more interesting. Patches of trees, or something like trees; a herd of big, shaggy creatures, Kodiak bear-sized but obviously vegetarians because they were industriously pushing some of the trees over to eat their leaves; a pair of rivers, a narrow, fast-moving one with little waterfalls that came down from the hills to my left and flowed to join a broader, more sluggish one on the right to make a bigger stream; a few other shaggy creatures, these quite a lot bigger still, feeding by themselves on whatever was growing in the plain—well, it was an interesting sight; maybe a little like the great American prairie or the African veldt must have looked before our forebears killed off all the wild meat animals.

The most interesting part of the simulation was a pack of a dozen or so predators in the middle distance, circling furtively around a group of three or four creatures I couldn't easily make out. I pointed. "Are those the ones?" I asked Hypatia. And when

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she said they were, I told her to get me up closer.

At close range I could see the hunted ones looked something like pigs—that is, if pigs happened to have long, skinny legs and long, squirrely tails. I noticed a mommy pig baring her teeth and trying to snap at the predators in all directions at once, and three little ones doing their best to huddle under the mother's belly. It was the predators I was paying attention to. They looked vaguely primate. That is, they had apelike faces and short tails. But they didn't look like any primate that ever lived on Earth, because they had six limbs: four that they ran on, and two more like arms, and in their sort-of hands they held sharp-edged rocks. As they got into position, they began hurling the rocks at the prey.

The mother pig didn't have a chance. In a couple of minutes, two of her babies were down and she was racing away with that long tail flicking from side to side like a metronome, and the surviving piglet right behind her, its tail-flicks keeping time with its mother's, and the six-limbed predators had what they had come for.

It was not a pretty scene.

I know perfectly well that animals live by eating, and I'm not sentimental about the matter—hell, I eat steak! (Not always out of a food factory, either.) All the same, I didn't like watching what was happening on this half-million-year-old alien veldt, because one of the piglets was still alive when the wolf-apes began eating it, and its pitiful shrieking got to me.

So I wasn't a bit sorry when Hypatia interrupted me to say that Mr. Tartch hadn't waited for me to call him and was already on the line.

NEARLY ALL OF MY conversations with Bill Tartch get into some kind of intimate area. He likes that kind of sexy talk. I don't particularly, so I tried to keep the call short. The basic facts he had to convey were that he missed me and that, unspokenly, he looked as good as ever—not very tall, not exactly handsome but solidly built and with a great, challenging I-know-what-fun-is-all-about grin—and that he was just two days out. That's not a lot of hard data to get out of what was more than a quarter-hour of talk capsuled back and forth over all those light-years, I guess, but the rest was private; and when I was finished, it was about time to get dressed for dinner with the PhoenixCorp people.

Hypatia was way ahead of me, as usual. She had gone through my wardrobe and used her effectuators to pull out a dressy pants suit for me, so I wouldn't have a skirt to keep flying up, along with a gold neckband that wouldn't be flopping around my face as the pearls had. They were good choices; I didn't argue. And while I was getting into them she asked chattily, "So did Mr. Tartch say thank you?"

I know Hypatia's tones by now. This one made my hackles rise. "For what?"

"Why, for keeping his career going," she said, sounding sur-

prised. "He was pretty much washed up until you came along, wasn't he? So it's only appropriate that he should, you know, display his gratitude."

"You're pushing your luck," I told her as I slipped into a pair of jeweled stockings. Sometimes I think Hypatia gets a little too personal, and this time it just wasn't justified. I didn't have to do favors to get a man. Christ, the problem was to fend them off! It's just that when it's over I like to leave them a little better off than I found them; and Bill, true enough, had reached that stage in his career when a little help now and then was useful.

But I didn't want to discuss it with her. "Talk about something else or shut up," I ordered.

"Sure, hon. Let's see. How did you like the Crabbers?"

I told her the truth. "Not much. Their table manners are pretty lousy."

Hypatia giggled. "Getting a weak stomach, Klara? Do you really think they're much worse than your own remote predecessors? Because I don't think *Australopithecus robustus* worried too much about whether its dinners were enjoying the meal, either."

We were getting into a familiar argument. "That was a long time ago, Hypatia."

"So is what you were looking at with the Crabbers, hon. Animals are animals. Now, if you really want to take yourself out of that nasty kill-and-eat business—"

"Not yet," I told her, as I had told her many times before.

What Hypatia wanted to do was to vasten me. That is, take me out of my meat body, with all its aches and annoyances, and make me into a pure, machine-stored intelligence. As other people I knew had done. Like Hypatia herself, though in her case she was no more than a simulated approximation

of someone who had once been living meat.

It was a scary idea, to be sure, but not altogether unattractive. I wasn't getting as much pleasure as I would have liked out of living, but I certainly didn't want to *die*. And if I did what Hypatia wanted, I would never have to.

But I wasn't prepared to take that step yet. There were one or two things a meat person could do that a machine person couldn't—well, one big one—and I wasn't prepared to abandon the flesh until I had done what the female flesh was best at. For which I needed a man . . . and I wasn't at all sure that Bill Tartch was the particular man I needed.

WHEN I GOT BACK for dinner in the PhoenixCorp vessel, everybody was looking conspiratorial and expectant. "We've got about twenty percent of the optical sheets in place," Terple informed me, thrilled with excitement. "Would you like to see?" She didn't wait for an answer, but commanded: "Hans! Display the planet."

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The lights went dark, and before us floated a blue-and-white globe the size of my head, looking as though it were maybe ten meters away. It was half in darkness and half in sunlight, from a sun that was out of sight off to my right. There was a half-moon, too, just popping into sight from behind the planet. It looked smaller than Luna, and if it had markings of craters and seas, I couldn't see them. On the planet itself I could make out a large ocean and a kind of squared-off continent on the illuminated side. Terple did something that made the lights in the room go off, and then I could see that there had to be even more land on the dark side, because spots of light—artificial lights, cities' lights—blossomed all over parts of the nighttime area.

"You see, Klara?" she crowed. "Cities! Civilization!"

Chapter IV

THEIR SHIPMIND REALLY was a good cook. Fat pink shrimp that tasted as though they'd come out of the sea within the hour, followed by a fritto misto, the same, with a decent risotto and figs in cream for dessert. Everything was all perfectly prepared. Or maybe it just seemed so, because everybody was visibly relaxing now that it had turned out we really did have something to observe.

What there wasn't any of was wine to go with the meal, just some sort of tropical juices in the winebulbs. June Terple noticed my expression when I tasted it. "We're not doing anything alcoholic until we've completed the obs," she said, half apologetic, half challenging. "Still, I think Hans can get you something if you really want it."

I shook my head politely, but I was wondering if Hypatia had happened to say anything to Hans about my fondness for a drink now and then. Probably she had; shipminds do gossip when they're as advanced as Hypatia and Hans, and it was evident that the crew did know something about me. The conversation was lively and far-ranging, but it never, never touched on the subject of the black hole itself, or black holes in general.

We made a nice, leisurely meal of it. The only interruptions were inconspicuous, as crew members one after another briefly excused themselves to double-check how well the spider robots were doing as they clambered all over that five-hundred-kilometer dish, seamlessly stitching the optical reflection plates into their perfect parabola. None of the organic crew really had to bother. Hans was permanently vigilant, about that and everything else, but Terple obviously ran a tight ship. A lot of the back-and-forth chat was in-jokes, but that wasn't a problem because Hypatia explained them, whispering in my ear.

When somebody mentioned homesickness and Oleg Kekuskian said jestingly—*pointedly* jestingly—that some of us weren't homesick at all, the remark was aimed at Humphrey

Mason-Manley: "He's pronging Terple, Klara, and Kekuskian's jealous," Hypatia told me.

Julia—that was *Hoo-lia*—Ibarruru, the fat and elderly Peruvian-Incan former schoolteacher, was wistfully telling Star-minder how much she wished she could visit the Core before she died, and was indignant when she found out that I'd never been to Machu Picchu. "And you've been all over the galaxy? And never took the time to see one of the greatest wonders of your own planet?"

The only subdued one was Mark Rohrbeck. Between the figs and the coffee, he excused himself and didn't come back for nearly half an hour. "Calling home," Mason-Manley said wisely, and Hypatia, who was the galaxy's greatest eavesdropper when I let her be, filled me in. "He's trying to talk his wife out of the divorce. She isn't buying it."

When the coffee was about half gone, Terple whispered something to the air. Evidently Hans was listening, and in a moment the end of the room went dark. Almost at once the planet appeared for us again, noticeably bigger than it had been before. She whispered again, and the image expanded until it filled the room, and I had the sudden vertiginous sense that I was falling into it.

"We're getting about two- or three-kilometer resolution now," Terple announced proudly.

That didn't give us much beyond mountains, shorelines, and clouds, and the planet was still half in sun and half dark. (Well, it had to be, didn't it? The planet was rotating under us, but its relative position to its sun didn't change.) When I studied it, something looked odd about the land mass at the bottom of the image. I pointed. "Is that ocean, there, down on the left side? I mean the dark part. Because I didn't see any lights there."

"No, it's land, all right. It's probably just that that part is too cold to be inhabited. We're not getting a square look at the planet, you know. We're about twenty degrees south of its equator, so we're seeing more of its south pole and nothing north of, let's say, what would be Scotland or southern Alaska on Earth. Have you seen the globe Hans put together for us? No? Hans, display."

Immediately a sphere appeared in the middle of the room, rotating slowly. It would have looked exactly like the kind my grandfather kept in his living room, latitude and longitude lines and all, except that the land masses were wholly wrong. "This is derived from old Heechee data that Star-minder provided for us," Hans's voice informed me. "However, we've given our own names to the continents. You see the one that's made up of two fairly circular masses, connected by an isthmus, that looks like a dumbbell? Dr. Terple calls it 'Dumbbell.' It's divided into Dumbbell East and Dumbbell West. Frying Pan is the sort of roundish one with the long, thin peninsula projecting to the southwest. The one just coming into view now is Peanut, because—"

"I can see why," I told him. It did look a little like a peanut. Hans was perceptive enough to recognize, probably from the tone of my voice, that I found this geography—planetography?—less than a little boring. Terple wasn't. "Go on, Hans," she said sharply when he hesitated. So he did.

Out of guest-politeness I sat still while he named every dot on the map for me, but when he came to the end, I did too. "That's very nice," I said, unhooking myself from my dining

place. "Thanks for the dinner, June, but I think I'd better let you get your work done. Anyway, we'll be seeing a lot of each other over the next five days."

Every face I saw suddenly wore a bland expression, and Terple coughed. "Well, not quite five days," she said uncomfortably. "I don't know whether anyone told you this, but we'll have to leave before the star blows."

I stopped cold, one hand stuffing my napkin into its tied-down ring, the other holding onto the wall support. "There wasn't anything about leaving early in your prospectus. Why wasn't I told this?"

"It stands to reason, Klara," she said doggedly. "As soon as the star begins its collapse, I'm shutting everything down and getting out of here. It's too dangerous."

I don't like being surprised by the people who work for me. I gave her a look. "How can it be dangerous when we're six thousand light-years away?"

She got obstinate. "Remember I'm responsible for the safety of this installation and its crew. I don't think you have any idea what a supernova is like, Klara. It's *huge*. Back in 1054 the Chinese astrologers could see it in *daylight* for almost the whole month of July, and they didn't have our lensing to make it brighter."

"So we'll put on sunglasses."

She said firmly, "We'll *leave*. I'm not just talking about visible light. Even now, with six thousand years of cooling down after it popped, that thing's still radiating all across the electromagnetic spectrum, from microwave to X-rays. We're not going to want to be where all that radiation comes to a focus when it's fresh."

AS I WAS BRUSHING my teeth, Hypatia spoke from behind me. "What Terple said makes sense, you know. Anything in the focus is going to get fried when the star goes supernova."

I didn't answer, so she tried another tactic. "Mark Rohrbeck is a good-looking man, isn't he? He's very confused right now, with the divorce and all, but I think he likes you."

I looked at her in the mirror. She was in full simulation, leaning against the bathroom doorway with a little smile on her face. "He's also half my age," I pointed out.

"Oh, no, Klara," she corrected me. "Not even a third, actually. Still, what difference does that make? Hans displayed his file for me. Genetically he's very clean, as organic human beings go. Would you like to see it?"

"No." I finished with the bathroom and turned to leave. Hypatia got gracefully out of my way just as though I couldn't have walked right through her.

"Well, then," she said. "Would you like something to eat? A nightcap?"

"What I would like is to go to sleep. Right now."

She sighed. "Such a waste of time. Sooner or later you know

you're going to give up the meat, don't you? Why wait? In machine simulation you can do anything you can do now, only better, and—"

"Enough," I ordered. "What I'm going to do now is go to bed and dream about my lover coming closer every minute. Go away."

The simulation disappeared, and her "Good night, then" came from empty air. Hypatia doesn't really go away when I tell her to, but she pretends she does. Part of the pretense is that she never acts as though she knows what I do in the privacy of my room.

It wasn't exactly true that I intended to dream about Bill Tartch. If I were a romantic type, I might actually have been counting the seconds until my true love arrived. Oh, hell, maybe I was, a little bit, especially when I tucked myself into that huge circular bed and automatically reached out for someone to touch

and nobody was there. I do truly enjoy having a warm man's body to spoon up against when I drift off to sleep. But if I didn't have that, I also didn't have anybody snoring in my ear, or thrashing about, or talking to me when I first woke up and all I wanted was to huddle over a cup of coffee and a piece of grapefruit in peace.

Those were consoling thoughts—reasonably consoling—but they didn't do much for me this time. As soon as I put my head down, I was wide awake again.

Insomnia was one more of those meat-person flaws that disgusted Hypatia so. I didn't have to suffer from it. Hypatia keeps my bathroom medicine chest stocked with everything she imagines I might want in the middle of the night, including half a dozen different kinds of anti-insomnia pills, but I had a better idea than that. I popped the lid off my bedside stand,

where I keep the manual controls I use when I don't want Hypatia to do something for me, and I accessed the synoptic I wanted to see.

I visited my island.

Its name is Raiwea—that's Rah-ee-*way*-uh, with the accent on the third syllable, the way the Polynesians say it—and it's the only place in the universe I ever miss when I'm away from it. It's not very big. It only amounts to a couple thousand hectares of dry land, but it's got palm trees and breadfruit trees and a pretty lagoon that's too shallow for the sharks ever to invade from the deep water outside the reef. And now, because I paid to put them there, it's got lots of clusters of pretty little bungalows with pretty, if imitation, thatched roofs, as well as plumbing and air conditioning and everything else that would make a person comfortable. And it's got playgrounds and game fields that are laid out for baseball or soccer or whatever a bunch of kids might need to work off excess animal energy. And it's got its own food factory nestled inside the reef, constantly churning out every vari-

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ety of healthful food anyone wants to eat. And it's mine. It's all mine. Every square centimeter. I paid for it, and I've populated it with orphans and single women with babies from all over the world. When I go there, I'm Grandma Klara to about a hundred and fifty kids from newborns to teens, and when I'm somewhere else I make it a point, every day or so, to access the surveillance systems and make sure the schools are functioning and the medical services are keeping everybody healthy, because I—all right, damn it!—because I love those kids. Every last one of them. And I swear they love me back.

Hypatia says they're my substitute for having a baby of my own.

Maybe they are. All the same, I do have a couple of my own ova stored in the Raiwea clinic's deep freeze. They've been there for a good many years now, but the doctors swear they're still one hundred percent viable and they'll keep them that way. The ova are there just in case I ever decide I really want to do that other disgustingly meat-person thing and give birth to my own genetically personal child. . . .

But I've never met the man I wanted to be its father. Bill Tartch? Well, maybe. I had thought he might be for a while, anyway, but then I wasn't really so sure.

WHEN I WAS UP and about the next morning, Hypatia greeted me with a fresh display of the Crabber planet. It was too big now to fit in my salon, but she had zeroed in on one particular coastline. In the center of the image was a blur that might have been manmade—personmade, I mean. "They're down to half-kilometer resolution now," she informed me. "That's pretty definitely a small city."

I inspected it. It pretty definitely was, but it was very definitely small. "Isn't there anything bigger?"

"I'm afraid not, Klara. Hans says the planet seems to be rather remarkably underpopulated, though it's not clear why. Will you be going over to the PhoenixCorp ship now?"

I shook my head. "Let them work in peace. We might as well do some work ourselves. What've you got for me?"

What she had for me was another sampling of some of the ventures I'd put money into at one time or another. There were the purely commercial ones such as the helium-3 mines on Luna, and the chain of food factories in the Bay of Bengal, and the desert-revivification project in the Sahara, and forty or fifty others; they weren't particularly interesting to me, but they were some of the projects that, no matter how much I spent, just kept getting me richer and richer every day.

Then we got to the ones I cared about. I looked in on the foundation Star minder had talked about, the one for sending humans into the Core to meet with the Heechee who had stayed behind. And the scholarship program for young women like myself—like I had been once, long ago—who were stuck in dirty, drudging, dead-end jobs. Myself, I got out of it by means of dumb luck and the Gateway asteroid, but that wasn't an option now. Maybe a decent education was.

Along about then, Hypatia cleared her throat in the manner that means there's something she wants to talk about. I guessed wrong. I guessed she wanted to discuss my island, so I played the game. "Oh, by the way," I said, "I accessed Raiwea last night after I went to bed."

"Really?" she said, just as though she hadn't known it all along. "How are things?"

I went through the motions of telling her which kids were about ready to leave, and how there were eighteen new ones who had been located by the various agencies I did business with, ready to be brought to the island next time I was in the neighborhood. As she always did, whether she meant it or not, she clucked approvingly. Her simulation was looking faintly amused, though. I took it as a challenge. "So you see there's one thing we animals can do that you can't," I told her. "We can have babies."

"Or, as in your own case at least so far, not," she said agreeably. "That wasn't what I was going to tell you, though."

"Oh?"

"I just wanted to mention that Mr. Tartch's ship is going to dock in about an hour. He isn't coming alone."

Sometimes Hypatia is almost too idiosyncratically human, and more than once I've thought about getting her program changed. The tone of her voice warned me that she had something more to tell. I said tentatively, "That's not surprising. Sometimes he needs to bring a crew with him."

"Of course he does, Klara," she said cheerfully. "There's only one of them this time, though. And she's very pretty."

To be continued . . .

Look for the conclusion of "Hatching the Phoenix" in the next issue of AMAZING Stories, on sale October 25.



About the Author

Frederik Pohl has been about everything it is possible to be in the world of science fiction, from conscripted fan and struggling poet to critic, literary agent, teacher, editor, and, he says above all: writer.

Kingsley Amis, in his critical study of science fiction, *New Maps of Hell*, called Pohl "the most consistently able writer science fiction, in modern form, has yet produced."

Pohl has won nearly every award presented in the science fiction field. He has earned the Nebula three times, including the Grand Master Nebula for lifetime contributions to the field, the Hugo six times—the only person ever to win it as both writer and editor—and was elected to serve as a Fellow to both the British Interplanetary Society and the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

About the Illustrator

Vincent Di Fate is regarded as one of the world's major illustrators of futuristic themes. In his thirty-year career, he has produced more than three thousand published works of science fiction, astronomical, and aerospace art for such diverse clients as IBM, Reader's Digest, the National Geographic Society, CBS, and NASA. He has received many awards for his work, including the Hugo Award, the 1990 Lensman Award for Lifetime Contribution to the Science Fiction Field, and the 1998 Chesley Award for Lifetime Artistic Achievement.

He created the original book cover illustration for Pohl's 1977 novel, *Gateway*, and it is with great pleasure that we display his work here today.





*It's mathematically true that one can't be two . . .
but in an equation of the heart, two can be one.*

BY WILLIAM A. EAKIN

HOMESICKNESS



*Mighty Gilgamesh came on and Enkidu met
him at the gate . . . so they grappled,
holding each other like bulls.*

*When Enkidu was thrown he said to Gilgamesh,
'There is not another like you in the world.'*

—THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH



DON'T THINK WHEN THEY MADE HIM that they intended to bring Boy Howdy's duplicate back to Earth. But they found, I believe, a yearning in the pit of his stomach, a hurtful longing for home at a depth of desire that they hadn't expected and that their sensitive natures could hardly tolerate. They knew the yearning was real, as real as his bone and blood, because they'd seen it before in all the earlier abductees; which is why, I believe, they duplicated Boy Howdy instead of just yanking him clean off to some faraway galaxy: Pain in the rear, those Earthlings with the homesickness, and it must have been terrible for the aliens to feel the longing all wrangled up in their abductees' guts and know they were the cause of it and know they could quench it simply by turning the children back to the green arms of their mother Earth. That's why hardly anyone's ever disappeared forever—they've all been pains in the rear and instead ended up in cornfields with singe marks on their foreheads and that baffled twinkle in their eyes.

The aliens initially thought they'd make exact replicas of humans so they could study whatever they needed to know about them, I believe. But to replicate humans in all their mental and psychic as well as physical states requires a massive amount of energy and a great deal of technical mastery over the universe at

ILLUSTRATION BY RICHARD DOWNS



the level of quantum events, which apparently the aliens have, given all the phenomena we associate with them, like the rapid appearance and disappearance of flying cigars and saucers and so forth. So I figure there must have been a lot at stake—a lot more than just dissecting a few Navy pilots.

What the aliens found was that the Earth-yearning and its attendant obnoxiousness was, in fact, at the very heart of their subject matter—even the darned replicants. So they got fed up with originals and replicants alike and—instead of destroying humankind, as the gods of Sumer, for example, might have done—they let us loose back at that place to which our hearts were attached: the Earth and, more specifically in the case of our story, Redgunk, Mississippi. So it came to pass that two Boy Howdys were walking the Earth and, more specifically, walking that kudzu-covered, creepy black earth of Boy Howdy's modest property just down the road from Mabel Delashmit's cornfield.

"THAT THERE'S CRITIAS, he's Plato's cousin, and that's Alcibiades, so named because he's always tryin' to hump Socrates, and all those thirty there, hell, all of 'em, are from the loins of America, that damned yellow dog with the black, smelly lips—see, I remember all the dogs' names and I remember when Uncle Joe named 'em all—and weren't he the sophisticate—and he's been dead three years, so I remember that from three years back." I spit on the ground, and he straightened there in the doorway of the tar paper shack; I could see his

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sweat start to trickle down his hairless front where the buttons were in the wrong damned holes, and that was when I realized he was just like me and yet somehow really alien, since he was like a mirror image except all wrong, his red cowlick not on my left side like my mirror image's would be, but on the right, and his right arm to my left instead of right in front of me, and so forth. I reiterated: "I remember all that."

"You're rememberin' my memories," he spit out—in my voice. "They's my memories."

"Just my rememberin' them at all makes 'em my memories," I retorted. "That's what it means to have your own memories, is to remember 'em."

"But they were originally mine—"

I did my best to be nonplussed and said, "I'm sorry for you, 'cause I think you must be very similar to me and so are probably feelin' quizzical about everything, and are probably wonderin' how the hell you got here, and how the hell you got to be just like me, and that's a real tragedy, see, and I know you're gonna deny the truth, because that's exactly what I would do, but you, sir, are a replica-mutant-monstrosity from outer space and I'm Boy Howdy."

"That's bull-honkin'-frog-shit." He kicked at the sprig of greenbrier that had wrapped itself around the door frame—my

door frame. "You're the copy, you son of a bitch—"

"Takes one to know one!"

"I am not a copy. I am me. And I know you're sayin' what you're sayin' precisely because you're a little scared, and he—I, I mean—I would be, too, in your place, because the fact is this little shack and Uncle Joe's Corner Liquor Store and Gas and all the little insect-buildups of life that I have made, you think you deserve, too, because you think you remember you have made them, and hell, some kind of fiery apocalyptic angel of panic sure enough's bound to be hittin' you in the pineal gland right now, for good reason, and I know you're feelin' anxious, and I'd like to invite you in for a brew, but frankly, you are a copy of me and a dangerous one at that, so you can go to hell or back to Mabel Delashmit's cornfield or wherever they released you—'cause those wild guardian angel aliens, they released me first to come back here to Earth, not you, which means I am the original man, if you follow my logic and—I don't know what the hell possessed them to let you go—"

"I remember Uncle Joe."

He mimicked me with the haughtiness of the kind of restrained panic I, too, was feeling: "I remember Uncle Joe and I remember them green revolving lights and I remember lyin' under that damned replicatin' machine and those ghoul-faced beasts lookin' down at me and the lights blastin' and them sayin' in their creaky, cranky voices, 'Well, you just hold on, Boy Howdy, we ain't takin' you from your beloved planet Earth, we're just gonna copy you, turn your energy into digital information and make a copy of you and then take the copy.' I remember that."

"So do I." I was starting to sweat as well, profusely. "I remember"—and, God, it was painful to remember—"I remember the

tingling feelin' of every molecule in my body being sucked up and pulled apart—into that—machine—" And the black 'o' of space searing open with the light of a million suns, because it takes that kind of energy to reproduce a fellow in his entirety, not just the information that makes up a guy, but all the matter, too, the tiny little particles of matter, all those had to be created, too, in new matter—in some kind of supernova impossible to do on a planet like Earth and only possible, given the energy expended, in deep space far away from just about any stellar body.

"And I remember that I was spit back out, whole and in one piece again." Or copied back out, to be more precise. Would that mean—

He said: "Less look at it another way: You might have my memories, but you can't have original thoughts such as those that might well up in Boy Howdy's brain, and I do, by jingo, I do have original thoughts that are solely my own—his and my own, I mean."

"Like hell. I had an original thought just now, walkin' off that

saucer down into Mabel Delashmit's cornfield, and it was the thought that if I found you here at my house, yes, my house, I'd kill you and then there'd be no mistakin' who's who and no one to contend for the right to be me, so I'd be me, and that's all there'd be to it."

"Original thought, hell," he said, and he pulled out the shotgun he'd stored right there at the door for just this occasion.

"You're an ignorant redneck," I told him.

"You're an ignorant redneck. Or were." He held the barrels of my own damned gun at me. I coon-hunted with that thing as a boy, Ole Blaster, and at night stars shone and I felt her cold steel against me, and I guess I never came close to loving nothing as much, or at all.

I said, "Now listen, you kill me, it's murder. Then it don't matter who you are, you're goin' to the federal penitentiary down at Felpham."

"Here's how I figure it, brother. How many Boy Howdys are there?"

"Just one."

"Exactly one. And if I told you, here's a second one, what would you say?"

"I'd say, no way in hell there could be, 'cause if there's only one, strictly speakin', there can't be two." Uncle Joe had always said "strictly speaking" when he waxed philosophic.

"Cause one can't be two, by definition; ain't mathematical."

"So..."

"So the second one don't really exist. It's a delusion, a pure bona fide fantasy. A dream. So I ain't murderin' someone real. I'm murderin' a dream, which ain't no murderin' at all, by definition, and not even manslaughter. See?" He put the barrel ends up to my chest and very nearly pulled the trigger.

And suddenly came a miracle: The thirty-some-odd dogs started moving, and a few of them whimpered loudly and scratched, and we both, I know, felt a fizzle in the air that wasn't anything more than a charge of recognition of some kind, and something I knew we both felt; and I knew now we both

me and tan my hide, and hit me hit me hit me till I bled and bled and refused to cry for the anger of it, and then how he'd give me a ten-dollar bill to make up and send me down to the Numan County line to Burly Bob's Bar and Grill to try some of the drinking and gambling and women there, 'cause I was nearly eighteen then, and fresh out of the halfway house at Felpham, and just going once every three or four weeks for follow-up therapy, and yes, I tried once to kill myself, too, like Bennie Joe, Mom's boyfriend, but I was fourteen then, and yes, I shot up Uncle Joe's Museum of Science and Egyptology, which he had at the back of the store, full of cloudy jars of formaldehyde-covered white lizards and sharks, and dominated by a beautiful fake mummy. Yes, I did that, but I was young, too young, and now in my thirties with Uncle Joe gone, I went whiskey-drunk to his grave and did what I thought I could do best at the time—throw up. And then I saw those green lights, those revolving heavenly Ezekiel-wheels, the burning Tibetan chariots of wild round-spinning Fortune. And then blankness, peace; stars and sounds like cicada music floating on a still hot summer night's air. We—he and I, we Boy Howdys—we remembered all that simultaneously, in a flash so palpable that the dogs felt it enough to moan and groan and turn over and scratch their fleas. So palpable that the barrels of that gun lowered on their own electrical stream.

I was just a day or so from that time of abduction, but now I saw my eyes in another man's body, only it was my body, too. And he saw the same thing looking at me. And he put down the barrels of that shotgun even farther, so they touched the wooden porch. And I said, "Well, you gonna invite me in?"

INSIDE WE SAT for a moment in numb silence on opposite ends of my worn old couch, he with my gun perched between his legs and aiming at nothing in the air, me with my emptiness, with just my open hands. And then he looked at me and said, "I'm damned amazed how close a copy you are."

And something snapped, because I knew he'd said it just to dig right into my skin, and so I jumped at him and tried to slam my fist into his wily little face, and he grabbed my hair and some of it came out in his fingers, red and dry and lifeless, and I did the same thing to him and kicked him in the balls, and then

originals and replicants alike and
— instead of destroying humankind,
as the gods of Sumer, for example, might have done—they let us loose back
at that place to which our hearts
were attached: the Earth.

remembered that whiskied-windy night when Boy Howdy himself—when I, that is—got drunk, really sickly drunk, and busted up Uncle Joe's Corner Liquor Store and Gas and ran down to Redgunk Cemetery to land right on the old man's stone and to think about him and how bad he'd been to me and yet how he was really my only family, him and the dogs, and how my Mama had run off with some Californian salesman after her boyfriend shot himself in our mobile home and messed up the shag carpets for all eternity and made the place reek, and how Uncle Joe had been the smartest damned man in Blake County—'cause he'd gone to two years of college on the GI Bill—and the richest man, too, since he had a corner on the gas-and-liquor business in Redgunk, and how he used to take

we were scratching and kicking and hitting like two wildcats with their tails tied together and finally I was on top of him looking straight down into his face, the blood from my nose dripping onto his cheeks. And I saw blood well up inside his nostrils, too, and run to either side of his head, and I wondered for a second if I'd really hurt him, and then I felt his foot come straight up into my groin, and everything went black and I heard a buzzing sound—again, I suppose, like the sound of a

billion trillion cicadas, and I found myself lying flat on my back right next to him, and we both lay there looking at the cracked plaster of the ceiling. We lay there a long time and listened to each other breathe. And then he stood like a creaky old man and went to the bathroom and wiped the blood from his face with toilet paper. I went and stood beside him and wiped the blood from my own nose and flushed the tissue down the rust-stained john. A familiar sound; my house; my bathroom. I looked up into my mirror and I saw my mirror image. Comforting, after having stared and stared at that alien thing that had been so like and yet so strangely unlike my own reflection.

He stood near me. He, too, looked in the mirror. And then we saw it, again simultaneously. Facing each other, we were so different, different simply by virtue of our not being mirror images of each other. But looking in the mirror, side by side, our reflected images were identical. I looked at his image and his line of vision crossed mine, and he saw in my image what I saw in his; in the reverted reflective world of mirror imagery, we were not just similar. We were one. I looked into his face, my face, and saw the glimmer of recognition in his eyes, and saw in those eyes

And talking, it struck me:
The truth is, neither of us is
the original; how could we be, since the original was broke up to
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followed was that the replicant came

all the same stuff I was—all the whole same life and the beatings and philosophizing with Uncle Joe, all the wailing that made up for Mama and the emptiness of the mobile home when she was no longer there but had returned to the wide green sea-of-an-Earth beyond the kudzu-lined boundaries of Blake County, and I saw then the moment when that little red line appeared across my white, white wrist and started to trickle down onto the plastic tub, that moment of wild whispering wonder, looking up from that bathtub to the cracked ceiling and seeing beyond it the stars, the stars that go-go-go stretching beyond everything so far that they drop off into the terror of nothing, and then the wild, soaring trip from consciousness to unconsciousness and back as the kudzu-covered trees came and went in a blinding strobe of late afternoon sun, the ambulance hurrying and the EMT looking through time and space jostled and warped by the ambulance motion, and him saying, “Boy Howdy, you’re too damned smart to be killin’ yourself,” and someone else—not Uncle Joe—added, “Too damned smart to stay in Redgunk, Mississippi.”

I saw in his eyes the same memories coming and going and searing into the gray brain matter and wisping out as dreams and torments and pleasant little fantasies and—hopes? I saw these same things in the eyes of my copy, and something moving through us like a doubt or a ghost or a yearning—something like a homesickness that we felt now, looking into each other’s eyes, into the clear moisture of our eyes. Strange to find a brother in one’s self. Strange not to be alone.

COULD I LIVE with myself? Well, the true test was the spaghetti dinner down at the First Mount Zion Christian

Church of Redgunk, sponsored weekly by the Christian Ladies of the Auxiliary. I almost always go anyway because it means getting a whole hell of a lot to eat with just a little bit of money, and sometimes there’s entertainment—like when Myrtle Kimbriel’s clam spaghetti sauce put Bobby Yocher in the hospital. The Rep and I, we needed verification that I wasn’t just dreaming, and we had the urge to talk with someone, anyone other than ourselves—or self, as it may be—and if we could get along in public, well, maybe we could learn to get along in private, too.

As usual, the Worthiest Matron Mattie Stumbaugh was there to greet us and to take our money—which luckily had been replicated in our trouser pockets—and to shove Styrofoam plates and plastic forks our way. But this time when she finally looked up from the little shoe box where she kept the dollar bills in neat little stacks, she gasped, and no one ever gasped in the basement of the First Mount Zion Christian Church of Redgunk, unless something momentous has happened—like the time Viralene Dorbad had yet another religious conversion in the bathroom. So everybody turned and looked and suddenly left their positions dishing clam spaghetti sauce or cutting garlic bread or putting ice into cups, and they all—all the Christian Ladies of the Auxiliary—surrounded us with eyes bugging out and little gasps of wonder and their crickety old hands touching

us with a kind of amazement—and I confess, I was enjoying the attention, half thinking, half feeling: This feels good. This really feels good. I might even begin to be okay about this. I might even begin to be okay about him. And I looked at my double and winked, and he winked back.

And the ladies all started saying, “Oh, come, come, you must sit in the place—or places—of honor! Tell us, tell us, what could have happened!” Most of them knew I had no twin, since most of them were there when I was born, hopping around like a bevy of creaky old animals even then, with their pastel announcement cards and ribbons and little dolls and so forth, and being all hypocritically smiley at the prospect of the new child—I say hypocritically since my Mom was always shacking up with one of their sons-in-law or another. So now all the Christian Ladies of the Auxiliary exploded into a crazed flowery bathroom-powdered kind of mass and lifted us off our feet and set us with some bodily violence in the seats where Brother Orin and his wife usually sit. And they brought us Cokes and spaghetti and more spaghetti and bread and Mattie Stumbaugh refunded our money and announced in a clear voice we would forego the usual program—which almost always includes a reading of the poem “Trees” and sometimes a dramatic enactment of a Bible story or two—so that I—me and myself, that is—could hold forth on the matter of my—our—great adventure.

When it came time to speak, my other half said to me, "You first."

And I said, "No, please, go ahead—"

And then he said, "Oh, no, I'm sure you will be much more eloquent. I'll just fill in the gaps. I insist."

And then I responded quite cordially, "No, I insist." And then things got really cordial as they often do in formal banquets of the sort, so it took some five minutes of back and forth, and me just about putting my fingers around his scrawny little neck and the ladies getting all nervous and shifting their weight on those metal folding chairs before we finally got through the ensuing, admittedly heated conversation. Finally Mattie Stumbaugh stood and said, "Uh, excuse me, gentlemen, shall we proceed?" We looked at each other, our eyes met, we nodded simultaneously, and he and I stood together. Seeing the faces of those ladies awed at us, we experienced a change: The anger and the fear washed away. We took deep breaths—deep, deep breaths, the kind a rooster must surely draw before he crows. And, proud as pumpkins, we told our story. It was our story. He told part, then I told part, then sometimes when we got hurried we'd say the same thing, in the same language, simultaneously, which was kind of neat and something, as far as I know, that had never before happened in Redgunk or the whole of Blake County.

And we told our story as if we'd simultaneously lived and experienced it all from the same perspective, as if both he and I were the real Boy Howdy. And talking, it struck me: The truth is, neither of us is the original; how could we be, since the original was broke up to be fed into that machine and what followed was that the replicant came out and then Boy Howdy himself

out and then Boy Howdy himself was reproduced—there's the truth of it right there in that word.

was reproduced—there's the truth of it right there in that word—not produced, not sustained, not continuous, but reproduced, and there's a difference, like the difference between an original and a danged Xerox copy. And the truth is if I were beamed from one place to another, I'd have to be cut up and reproduced and become then a reproduction. And so neither one of us is him, the original. I mean, no one who goes through that can be the same, even if it didn't take the explosions of a million supernovas to do it, even if we were just teleporting from house to house, or even if we just casually sidled up to a replicator and pushed the button, because, say, we needed someone to clean the house while we went fishing—we would never come back, no one comes back. The old man is gone and the new replaces him—the new!

Pause. For a moment I heard their laughter—one of us had told a joke in good Toastmaster style—and I started to feel strangely good and bad. I felt in me a mixture of dark and light. And outside I smiled, but inside I waxed philosophical in such a way that it would have made Uncle Joe proud. And what are we

from moment to moment anyway, I waxed, some kind of sustained monument of self that never changes and unfortunately cannot change? Or are we something living and always changing, destroyed and created in every split second, so that maybe the whole danged universe is like a giant writhing dragonlike replicator, destroying and creating us, and we are the scales, stills of a movie on snake-twisted film, and the film tells a story, and we believe the story. That's the flickering movie magic. And the bodhisattva-angel-aliens? Maybe they don't do nothin' special when they replicate us except to show us that it's done. So at birth we become Boy Howdy and we become a pinkish child and someone who wants to hold onto Mama but instead must fetch stuff for Uncle Joe and get beaten beaten beaten because we can't act right because she's gone and because we got too many pimples and we got hair growing under our arms and start to smell or because we want love and instead must touch ourselves for pleasure back behind the barn and we become the creature in a cold ceramic bathroom that yearns to bleed back into black mother soil, feeling and breathing with every breath the desire that someone will come and take us away and give us hope and give us the hug, the warm hug I ain't never had, not even newborn; we alone; we are either alone alone alone alone in the crowded film, the twisting dragon film. Or we are not.

And I looked at the Rep and he looked back. He looked back! Or we are not alone. The aliens had changed me. I was not a creature before this moment who could experience joy. *But you make me feel it!* There was this palpable beam, a beam of proud happiness like a nimbus-growing light, a light so subtle you could not see it. It started there between us; I could feel it in his chest as well as mine, and it spread all around us; I could see it in the faces of the Christian Ladies of the Auxiliary, because they started beaming with it as if they'd been touched by the same mysterious and big and holy thing passing through the night, as if they, too, had been abductees in the arms of alien-angels and were now being touched with the shimmering alien hand that gave form to the smallest quarks and gave to those smallest particles that ringing held in common by the largest spheres and by a room full of little old ladies—and their applause. And their loud love.

And all that sounds like a bunch of metaphysical crap, but it wasn't crap on their faces—it was real. My skin tingled with it when I looked at the ladies and when I looked at him with this feeling of hope, this feeling of friendship, this feeling of coming home.

FUNNY HOW THINGS turn out, though. Icarus flies as high as he can into the celestial spheres, but that highest point's where he's gonna start to fall. While we were basking in this metaphysical sun, twenty-year-old April Ann McCauley, who was there with her grandmother, sauntered across the room to give us dessert. She leaned over with the two plates of peanut-butter-7-Up pie and whispered in both our ears: "I got my daddy's pickup in the church parking lot and a liter of Jack Daniel's if you boys would like to come out and play after dinner."

Well, you may not know it, but one of the most welcome things to happen to a man after he has been traumatized and maybe ripped up into some 1,028 discrete particles and various

accompanying sorts of radiation is to have some young woman stroke him off in the back of a pickup truck, even if she does have a mustache. So naturally we were intrigued, especially there being two of us. One of us—I'm not sure which—said, "Well, what about your grandma, girl? Don't you gotta take her home?"

She whispered—and her breath smelled like the sweet but pungent garlic in the bread, which was kind of nice and balanced out the slightly perceptible girl-body-in-a-clean-starched-dress smell: "Daddy's comin' in his new four-by-four to pick her up—"

Lightning struck: "Your daddy," I said, "is a bull and could wrench my head off with his pinkie and is known to have killed a man. He catches us with you and that Jack Daniel's—"

"Oh, he'll be comin' in the front and I'm parked out back. And anyway, I'll drive y'all down to Burly Bob's Bar and Grill and we'll close the place out and I'll treat—I'd like to show you boys off."

smiled sheepishly. We might have taken her up at any other

time. But now after all that had happened, after meeting me, looking

for love with her in the pickup seemed secondary.

Burly Bob's. The Numan County line. Sin and degradation. It would easily be worth facing bodily harm, but . . . I said, "April Ann, I just don't want to die." And my compatriot added politely, "Thank you, no, April Ann."

She straightened up in a huff, the starched folds of her dress clacking together. "Are you telling me no?"

"Yes'm."

She whispered violently at us: "You gotta be kiddin' me. You're passin' up Jack Daniel's—you, Boy Howdy?"

I smiled sheepishly. We might have taken her up at any other time. But now after all that had happened, after meeting me, looking for love with her in the pickup seemed secondary.

I think she caught onto that and was frankly offended. Her voice got more ferocious: "You're passin' up the best time of your life, you—you slimy scum!"

I looked at the other Boy Howdy and that other Boy Howdy—not really other—looked at me. "Thank you kindly for the invitation. If your daddy—"

"You are passin' up a free night of anythin' you want!" she said loud enough now so that the ladies all had to work really hard for the appearance that they'd not heard. "And I'm talkin' about anything!"

We nodded, and she threw invisible violent radiation into the air around us, then did a quick about-face like a crazed soldier and stormed away past the clearing of the plates and the beelike humming of the whispered gossip that would occupy the ladies for the better part of the month.

I looked at him, my self, my friend, and he looked at me. We shrugged. I said, "Old Man Jake ripped the head off Tom Rowbotham when he found him pumpin' April Ann down at Gish Quarry. Weren't no car accident."

He nodded. "He didn't kill Orin Amsworth from Blue Falls."

"But he turned him inside out, and I ain't seen nobody come down from Blue Falls since then!" Our eyes met, and we laughed. We laughed! I believe it was the first time in my entire life that I laughed. Thank you. Thank you for coming to be with me.

THE NIGHT AIR WAS calm and clear, and the stars were silent. We turned again to thank Miz Stumbaugh for the covered paper plates of spaghetti and bread and stepped away from the powdery smells of the Wednesday night supper into the kudzu world of the Mississippi night.

A car door slammed in the dark, a hollow, nonechoing sound. A massive dark form rose up so that it started to cover the stars like an oncoming storm or a black bull crossing the heavens, and I heard my double say, "Shit! It's Old Man Jake."

"Howdy, Mr. McCarley," I said to him real nicely.

The next voice chilled us: "That's them. They were tryin' to do me. They were making passes at me, Daddy, right in front of Grandma. The whole church heard what they were sayin' about me and what they was wantin' to do with me."

His voice was big, too: "I understand you boys have been

treatin' my daughter with a little disrespect."

No-win situation here. I said, admittedly trembling, "Well, you see, sir, we just had this rather unusual experience and—"

"I don't care if you've been moonin' astronomers from flying teacups, that's no call to treat my April Ann like some common—"

"It wasn't us, though!" I blurted without thinking. "It was—I mean, she wanted us to—"

"What are you talkin' about, boy? You callin' my daughter a slut?"

"Daddy, Daddy," she said. "My reputation!"

"Shut up," he said to her. And to us: "Just 'cause it's true doesn't give you license to be obscene in front of the Ladies of the Auxiliary of the First Mount Zion Christian Church of Redgunk. It pisses me off"—and now his voice boomed louder and heavier and angrier—"it friggin' pisses me off to imagine you two young scumbuckets makin' with lewd advances in front of all those little old ladies and in front of my—I don't give a damn about April Ann's so-called reputation, a little late for that, but it pisses me off that you boys'd be behaving like dogs in a park in front of my ninety-year-old mother when all I wanted was for her to get outta the Windy Pines Residence Center for just a couple of quiet social hours with her old friends, and instead—she sees this crap, exposed to perversion and sickness and death—oh, Mama! Mama, what have they done?" And the death part seemed to come out of nowhere, but fit rather nicely in the sentence. I realized there hadn't been any death yet at all, but that there was an implicit "yet" tagged onto that sentence, and I

realized this fully only when the bull let loose a massive warrior roar that must have come from some dark, deep, unvisited, still-water part of his barbaric gene pool, and that's when I got the full drift of the matter and lurched to one side just as his Herculean arms blasted the space around us and walls and walls of raw muscle separated us, me from myself, me from him, me from the other Boy Howdy, and sent me sprawling to the ground, my bones cracking against the pavement. I twisted back to see if I could catch a panicked glimpse of him, my double, my friend, Boy Howdy. His head seemed to be on backward as the giant lifted him high into the air. Boy Howdy! There was a slash of stasis, and then Boy Howdy—and that is the only way I can imagine referring to him—my Boy Howdy flew in what was ironically gentle slow motion to crash without sound into the garbage cans that were on the curb for Thursday morning pickup, without sound except for that hollow watermelon-thunk of his head hitting the street.

Silence. And then the resonating roll of a trash can lid turning, turning, and slapping to the pavement.

"If you don't gotta burial policy," said the bull, "send me the bill." And then he and his daughter were gone. And I crawled over to Boy Howdy.

Oh, God! This being, this being of light, lying here with such a gentle face in the cool light of stars! Surely not—dead—neck broken? No. Head broken off? No, just bleeding, just a crack in the skull, dearest blood—you feel warm and full of life on my fingers. My blood, too, isn't it? My blood, too. Dead? No. But—hospital. Must get to hospital—who is this, they will want to know, your twin? Who? Your name? Can you give names to the stars, really? Or to the vacant space between them? Oh, Boy Howdy. You take the name, my friend; I give it to you and make it solely yours. Boy Howdy, are you all right? Are you—

"Boy Howdy," I said, and I shook him. "Are you okay?"

"Boy Howdy," he whispered to me, at me. "You're Boy Howdy." His voice was rough, choked. The fall had been a bad one, and blood was running from where his skull had bounced against the concrete.

"I love you, Boy Howdy," I whispered to him. And then he started to choke, and I said, "We'll go in, get this bandaged."

"No, no," he whispered. "Home. Go home. Our home."

"It's—" Home was a quarter of a mile up the ridge road.

"I can make it." Reading my mind.

"Let's go. Let's go." I hurt, too, something broken, but I helped him to his feet. He slumped forward, steadied, and then leaned heavily against me. *I would carry you, no matter how much it hurt. I would give myself for you. I would die for you!*

"Go," he said. And we went, with my head singing: *God, God, God, don't bleed out, don't die, oh damn.* We went like a cursing, hurting, panicked, demolished, limping four-legged animal up the ridge road until I finally had to stop where we could look back and see the lights of Redgunk nestled in the kudzu-shapeless countryside, the steeple of the First Mount Zion Christian Church of Redgunk and the garish yellow sign of Uncle Joe's Corner Liquor Store and Gas. And the stars.

The blood continued to flow from the split in his head and down along my arms. It was a bad blow. I tried to look into his eyes, to search for that wink and that camaraderie no other eyes could have, and something, some spirit in them, seemed to pull

back inside. *Oh God, oh damn, oh no, please, shit, don't do this, damn it; I—after a million years without you—don't—*

We were standing on the edge of Mabel Delashmit's forty acres of corn. The Milky Way with its wide wild circling defined the edges of the Earth, the humble Earth. Boy Howdy slumped again, and this time we both fell and lay there gasping on the rich, black soil below the corn and the stars. And I put one of my wrenched arms around him to cradle him. He was shivering. *I do not want you to go!*

Whatever those aliens did to Boy Howdy when they copied him—when they copied us—it changed him. It changed us. And maybe what they'd done was what the whole of their project really was about, getting the new somehow out of the old. I touched him. I reached out and held his hand. And without the one thousand billion degrees required to unbind him from his quarks, without the blast of the hundred one-megaton hydrogen bombs needed to do the work or, indeed, the blast of the thousand one-megaton hydrogen bombs released when a small man became pure energy, without a skip in the writhing motions of the dragon, he was gone. Completely. Vanished. Dissolute. I was cradling dark dirt and the empty-husk remains of last season's corn.

I sat for a long time, waiting to see if those stars would open up and the alien vessel come down again for me or spit him back out. I saw against the night's fabric memories of the afterblasts of those energy releases that had made me and him out of me. Out of me and him. And I felt pity—no, compassion—for the Boy Howdy from whom we'd been made, the one left behind when we were made, he being too close to himself to see that from the dissolution of a single small human frame, a supernova is released, he being not separate enough from himself to learn the friendship of a man. I felt compassion for that old Boy Howdy, because he and his kind were like last season's corn, he could not see the stars as I now saw them, and where he felt in every moment, in the stars or in Redgunk, Mississippi, a kind of homesickness, I was home. 🍷



about the author

William R. Eakin lives with his wife Laura and three children, plus the horse, three dogs, and an incalculably large number of cats on a chunk of land named "the Thicket" (after the safe place in *Bambi*), where he's been inspired to create his "Redgunk, Mississippi." Redgunk tales can be found in a number of places, including recent issues of *Realms of Fantasy*, *Science Fiction Age*, *Quantum*, and the new *Rusch/Greenberg Year's Best Fantasy anthology*. He's also had work in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* and *Non-Stop*.



about the illustrator

Artist Richard Downs is an award-winning editorial illustrator who has worked for most U.S. consumer and trade magazines. In the cyberworld Richard is a frequent art contributor to websites and a consultant on CD-ROM games including *Riven*, the sequel to *Myst*.

Richard received a BFA in illustration from Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, in 1984, and taught editorial illustration for six years there. He lives with his wife Gwyn and their daughter Jillian in Nevada City, California.

BY JAMES MORROW

*Is this the way the world ends? Aided by gifts
from the grave, a mother risks everything to save
her son from the clutches of...*

KEVIN'S FETCH

WHEN God's gigantic skull went into geosynchronous orbit above the Western hemisphere, reflecting the Sun by day and rivaling the Moon each night, Nora Burkhart tried not to take it personally. But in recent years she'd known so much bereavement—a mother lost to throat cancer, a father to Alzheimer's, a husband to coronary thrombosis—that the omnipresent death's-head seemed to be monitoring her life alone, beaming down a grin of dark mockery and sadistic glee.

Nora Shafron and Eric Burkhart had fallen in love under circumstances simultaneously public and private. The event occurred before six hundred pairs of eyes, though only Nora and Eric knew what was happening. He'd brought his magic act to Cary Hall in Lexington (a low point in his career) and needed a volunteer from the audience. Nora raised her hand. She thought him Byronic. Seconds later she ran onto the stage, and by the time she'd plucked the outsized jack of spades from the pack, displaying it for everyone but Eric

to see, the two of them had achieved mutual infatuation: So said their incandescent stares. When Nora knocked on his dressing-room door that night, Eric the Uncanny was already pouring the champagne.

He died on the job, two weeks after his thirty-eighth birthday and seven days before their fifth anniversary. Having just imprisoned his marginally clothed female assistant in a plywood sarcophagus, he was merrily skewering it with a scimitar when his heart suddenly ceased to function. With

ILLUSTRATION BY CLIFF NIELSEN





a guttural groan he clutched his chest, stumbled forward ten paces, and, as the audience's murmurs filled the Cabot Theater in downtown Boston, fell into the orchestra pit. He was a corpse before he hit the floor, bequeathing to Nora but three sustaining circumstances: a seventy-five-dollar-a-month pension from the North American Conjurers' Guild, a steamer trunk full of magic props, and a male embryo developing in her womb.



Eric's mother rose to the occasion, changing half of the first two hundred diapers and feeding the baby from bottles of expressed milk, but it was Kevin himself who really rescued Nora, soothing her grief with his

IT WAS KEVIN HIMSELF WHO REALLY RESCUED NORA, SOOTHING HER GRIEF WITH HIS CHIRPY LAUGH AND TALENT FOR BUFFOONERY.

chirpy laugh and talent for buffoonery. Although her child could not claim Eric's comeliness (he looked, in a word, goofy), he had clearly inherited his father's theatricality. One hot August afternoon in 1998, when Kevin was nine, he rounded up the neighborhood kids and made them watch a vaudeville show featuring Kevin the Incredible telling jokes, juggling tennis balls, and performing magic tricks. He charged each child twenty-five cents; the take, \$3.75, went into the family till. As an eleven-year-old Webelos Scout, Kevin routinely enthralled his peers around the campfire by spinning out versions of Edgar Allan Poe stories more lurid than the originals. For "The Pit and the Pendulum," he astutely increased the number of tortures from two to five. For "The Tell-Tale Heart," he exploited the possibilities in other organs, adding a tell-tale sneezing nose and a tell-tale farting colon.

With an amalgam of pride and wistfulness, acceptance and melancholy, Nora watched her son grow older, turn inward, move beyond her. Santa Claus had long since vacated Kevin's pantheon. The boy hadn't gone trick-or-treating since 1999. He still did magic, but his act had recently grown morbid, the standard disappearing goldfish and transmigrating rabbits supplanted by routines such as The Brainless Brain Surgeon, The Giggling Mortician, and The Gourmet Ghoul—not to mention The Roman Oracle, in which Kevin, posing as an ancient soothsayer, would seemingly sacrifice a live cat on stage, open its abdomen, and pull from its innards a dozen plastic Easter eggs filled with predictions concerning upcoming Red Sox games and Presidential elections.

What endured was his generosity. Some months he donated as much as twenty dollars to their communal cause, though it was usually more like ten. They needed it. On Kevin's sixth birthday, the Lexington School Committee had informed Nora that her English-teaching position at Paul Revere Junior High

School no longer existed—dwindling enrollments, atrophied ideals—and after that the only job she could get was clerking and driving for Ray Ornstein's Tower of Flowers in Copley Square, her salary barely sufficient to buy the groceries, pay the phone bill, and appease the landlord of their East Cambridge apartment. Thanks to Kevin's magic act, their life together included many small amenities, from pet goldfish to rented videos, ice cream sundaes to take-out pizza.

Working for Ray Ornstein had its perks—pleasant scents suffused Nora's day, stray cuttings beautified her kitchen, and the endlessly amiable Ray let her use the delivery truck after hours—but she yearned to get back in the classroom. An English teacher was a person. An English teacher possessed a name. In the mouths of her admiring ninth-graders, "Mrs. Burkhart"

had sounded almost like a military rank or a hereditary title: Mrs. Burkhart, English teacher, routinely captivating Lexington's adolescents with Greek myths and Norse legends. But now she was merely the chick at the cash register, the lady behind the steering wheel, the girl with the gladiolas.

Nora's metaphysical difficulties began on the first Friday in September. Kevin had just started eighth grade, an event that by all appearances had further strengthened his

resolve to put childhood behind him. That particular morning, however, he forsook sophistication and smiled joyfully when he saw an unopened package of breakfast cereal on the kitchen table. A magic trick lay concealed in every Wizard of Oats box. Collect all six, kids. To Nora's delight, Kevin suggested that they upend the box then and there, dumping out the cereal until the treasure showed itself. His enthusiasm did not surprise her. The universe of illusion was so important to Kevin that even its most degraded emanations thrilled him.

As Nora pulled the necessary stainless steel mixing bowl off the shelf, her son scanned the back of the cereal box. "I hope I get the Chinese rings," he said. "The rubber thumb would be good, too."

She set the mixing bowl on the table, reading the box over his shoulder. "I like the Indian rope trick."

Kevin inverted the box. The auburn nuggets tumbled over each other as they avalanched into the bowl. Myths were embedded everywhere, she thought, even in the hyperindustrialized West. Cereal, from Ceres, Roman goddess of grain.

He said, "Maybe it'll be the vanishing coin."

Excavating cereal boxes had been for Kevin a singularly pleasurable activity ever since, six months earlier, he'd hit the jackpot. Attack Force Flakes was one of many products spun off from a popular TV cartoon series about a United Nations commando unit battling its way across the oil fields of an unnamed Middle Eastern country. Nora hated the cereal's politics, but Kevin loved its taste. Each box came with a trading card portraying either an Attack Force hero or a member of the fanatical opposition, but every ten-thousandth box also concealed a coupon good for one Swiss Army knife. Despite these odds, Nora's third purchase of Attack Force Flakes yielded this very bonanza, the slip of paper fluttering out of the box like an origami bird and landing on the kitchen floor.

Within a month, the amazing Swiss Army knife arrived. Nora and Kevin marveled at its versatility, prying up each tool and testing it (scissors, bottle opener, corkscrew, magnifier, insulation stripper, wood saw), and soon afterward they began mythologizing the great knife's prowess. If they got a flat tire, Kevin would say, "We'll have to use the lug wrench on my Swiss Army knife." If he seemed to be running a fever, she would say, "Time to use the digital thermometer on your Swiss Army knife." And so it went: Time to use the snow shovel on the Swiss Army knife, the hedge clippers, the welding torch, the posthole digger, the chain saw, the jackhammer—a running gag that never ran out.

The Wizard of Oats box was nearly empty by the time something other than a nugget appeared atop the mound. Curiously, it wasn't a magic trick but a simple magnifying glass, no larger than the lid of an olive jar, distinguished only by an odd inscription on the plastic handle:

LENS * LOBO * LIGHT OF GOD

"They made a mistake," said Kevin, twisting the handle of the magnifying glass, hoping to unscrew it. The prize remained intact. "Lens, lobo, light of God . . . what does *that* mean?"

With a measuring cup, Nora transferred some Wizard of Oats into his cereal bowl. "Beats me. 'Lobo' is Spanish for wolf."

Kevin slapped the magnifying glass onto the table. "I was hoping for the Chinese rings."

"I'm sorry, honey. Maybe if I mail it to the company, they'll send us a real trick."

"You think so?"

"Not really, no." She glanced at the clock. The school bus would be at the corner in nine minutes. "Shit, we're running late."

"Can we get another box next week?"

"Sure. Better eat."

Her gaze drifted toward the kitchen window. Jehovah's gigantic headbone—the Cranium Dei, as the classically inclined called it—flashed her a smile. What a strange and frightening phenomenon was upon them. God dead, His corpse decayed, His skull in orbit. Nobody in the present age, no theologian, philosopher, politician, psychologist, poet, or myth teacher, could discuss it coherently.

She closed her eyes and said, "Come on, Kevin. Eat."

"Do you think it was meant just for us?" He picked up the magnifying glass and stared through it while simultaneously inundating his Wizard of Oats with milk.

"No, I don't. Eat, darling. Have you got your key? Is your homework in your backpack?"

"I think it was meant just for us." He put a spoonful of cereal in his mouth and chewed. "Somebody's trying to get our attention."

"Could be."

"He sure got mine."

"Good. Eat."

THE ENIGMATIC magnifying glass had not only seized Kevin's attention, it ultimately claimed Nora's consciousness as well. Instead of sending the prize to General Mills and

demanding a magic trick in its place, she kept it near her at all times, removing it from her handbag during free moments—coffee breaks, lunch hours, railroad crossings—and running a finger along the etched handle. Lens, lobo, light of God. The words sounded oracular, incantatory, like Dante's forbidding "All hope abandon, ye who enter here," or the prophet asking Ishmael and Queequeg, "Shipmates, have ye shipped in that ship?"

Nine weeks after the magnifying glass's arrival, Nora was assigned to deliver a thousand orchids to Brookline's Arborway Cemetery in advance of a four o'clock interment—her last stop of the day. Striding toward Lot 49A, she watched as three grimy workers used cranes and winches to lower an intact 1999 Cadillac Catera into the hole. A battered backhoe rose from a nearby knoll like a mutant steam shovel. Having just scooped out the oversized grave, the backhoe operator, a rangy man with a gold tooth and a bad shave, was enjoying a cigarette.

She approached the Catera and looked through the windshield. Behind the wheel sat the embalmed remains of an elderly gentleman dressed in Bermuda shorts and a splashy Hawaiian shirt. His teeth were bared in a grin of astonished joy, as if he'd just won the car in a raffle. Nora wasn't surprised. She'd expected some such burial since noticing that the crib sheet specified a scion of the fabulously wealthy and extravagantly nutty Gansevoort family. In April 1993, Estella Gansevoort had zoomed into heaven astride her beloved Harley Davidson. Two years later, Horace Gansevoort had gone to glory in his speedboat. The previous summer, Roger Gansevoort had piloted a Cessna through the Pearly Gates.

Climbing out of the backhoe cab, the operator volunteered to help her unload the panel truck. He looked her in the eye, flirtatiously. What her face had going for it, she felt, was not beauty but rather a certain drama: black irises, full lips, ambitious cheekbones—features that had proved particularly useful in staring down unruly students.

"Offer accepted," she said. There were times, such as today, when she missed sex so much that doing it with a semiskilled laborer in the cab of a backhoe would seem, on balance, more earthy than degrading.

"First time I heard about these wackos and their crazy coffins, I thought it was pretty funny," said the operator, wrapping his long arms around a cluster of orchids.

"Now I think, such a waste."

"It's always a thin line between panache and decadence," said Nora, wondering whether the man knew how blatantly he was staring at her breasts.

"Whatever. Personally, I don't get why people bother with funerals anymore." Approaching the hole, he set down the flowers and nodded toward the celestial skull. God shone brightly in the clear autumn sky. "If you want my opinion, heaven's been locked up tight for a long time now. These days, even a billionaire can't get in."

Later, leaving the scene of the impending funeral, Nora steered the panel truck along the labyrinthine roads of Arborway Cemetery. A colossal granite vault loomed before her, more lavish than any residence she was likely to occupy in either life or death. Whoever these aristocrats might be, their mausoleum could easily accommodate a dozen generations.



The Cranium Dei's rays poured down, streaming through a stand of poplar trees and throwing patches of divine light on the tomb portal. Above the greenish-black steel door, chiseled deep into the lintel, the name LOBO lay amid the shifting shadows.

Pulse pounding, Nora pulled over. She grabbed her handbag, quit the truck, and rushed toward the mausoleum. Framed by leaf shadows, a brilliant spot of skullshine danced atop the first O in LOBO. Tiny printing, inaccessible to the unaided eye, filled the oval like an engraved motto on a gold watch.

She took out the magnifying glass and positioned it over the minuscule words, easing them into focus. Three distinct inscriptions hovered before her gaze. She blinked. The top quotation, deadly serious, was the most commendable sentiment she'd ever seen attributed to the central figure of the English Civil War.

I BESEECH YOU, IN THE BOWELS OF CHRIST, THINK
IT POSSIBLE YOU MAY BE MISTAKEN.

— OLIVER CROMWELL

The bottom quotation, more playful than its counterpart, was ascribed to a Manhattan sculptor whose work Nora had grown to admire over the years.

THE ABSENCE OF GOD IS GOD ENOUGH.
— SAINT CLAIR CEMIN

The central quotation seemed to Nora little more than a joke.

I AM INDEED IMPRISONED IN A CHINESE FORTUNE-
COOKIE FACTORY, BUT HAVE YOU PONDERED THE
SUBTLE COGNITIVE SNARES IN WHICH YOU YOUR-
SELF MAY BE TRAPPED?

— LING PO FAT

DRIVING HOME that evening, palms locked tightly around the steering wheel, Nora experienced a profound and relentless unease. Whatever satisfaction she'd felt in solving the magnifying glass mystery evaporated before her fear that she'd been appointed a kind of messenger. In the days ahead, she sensed, the Cranium Dei would be expecting her to function as a postmillennial Moses, revealing to the world the arcane connections between Cromwell's skepticism, God's absence, and the fate of Ling Po Fat.

She intended to turn the job down. The universe had kicked her around enough of late. She'd assumed her fair share of obligations. Having endured the death of a husband, the loss of a career, the ordeal of single motherhood, and the banalities of driving a delivery truck, Nora Burkhart was not about to become, under any circumstances, God's little errand girl.

THREE MONTHS LATER, on a Monday morning, Kevin awoke shivering, his lips and fingertips as blue as the oceans on his Rand McNally globe. Oddly, his temperature was normal—slightly below normal, in fact, 97.8 degrees Fahrenheit. Was it possible to be battling an infection without running a fever? Nora didn't know.

"I don't like leaving you home alone," she told him.

"If a robber breaks in," said Kevin, "I'll shoot him with the derringer on my Swiss Army knife."

"It's probably one of those twenty-four-hour viruses. If you're feeling better, you can study for your algebra test."

"Bad idea, Mother. Algebra causes relapses. This is a known fact."

"Don't spend the day watching MTV. Television causes brain cancer. This is a known fact."

Descending to street level, she approached the delivery truck—Phaëthon, she called it, after the reckless young demigod who'd nearly incinerated Earth while joyriding in the chariot of the Sun—its panels emblazoned with the motto RAY ORNSTEIN'S TOWER OF FLOWERS: WHATEVER THE DAY, WE HAVE THE BOUQUET. With her Lucite scraper, she shaved the frost off the windshield. She climbed behind the wheel, drove through her scruffy East Cambridge neighborhood, and, reaching the Longfellow Bridge, piloted Phaëthon over the Charles River. The Arlington Street traffic knot was less tangled than usual, and she attained the Newbury intersection five minutes ahead of schedule. She parked at a meter, inserted a quarter, and glanced skyward. Cirrus clouds rimmed God's skull. He appeared to be wearing a white toupee. At least there weren't any ads today. Why the Vatican permitted the multinationals to aim their lasers at His brow was a mystery she couldn't fathom. Contemplating the Cranium Dei was depressing enough. You shouldn't have to read COKE IS IT at the same time.

Eight years in Ray Ornstein's employ . . . and still Nora loved entering the flower shop on a winter's day: that wondrous jump from biting wind to tropical warmth. She slammed the door behind her and paused, inhaling the layered fragrances. Her favorite coworker, Ruthie Dart, a moody Lesley College dropout who sprayed her hair so liberally that the results suggested a crash helmet, greeted her with an affectionate grunt.

On the counter lay Nora's clipboard. She perused the crib sheet. Three deliveries by ten-thirty. Busy morning.

She loaded the bouquets into Phaëthon and sped off toward the first stop, a funeral home in South Boston. Swathed in black, Cynthia Beckwith took the basket of lilies in her arms.

With deepest condolences read the greeting card. *Yours truly, Louis Thorpe.* "I'm so sorry," said Nora. "To tell you the truth, Bill and I didn't get along," the widow replied. "I'm marrying Louis next month."

Recipient number two was Nick Ambrose, a used-car dealer in Medford whose wife sought to make amends for the morning's altercation. "Some guys are so insecure, they can't stand getting flowers, but I think it's terrific," he told Nora, plunking the pot of hyacinths on the counter. "You're a credit to your gender," she replied, tossing him a grin.

Nora's third destination was the Fresh Pond Leisure Club, site of an impending luncheon. As Nora entered the banquet hall, the organization's president, a stout woman with excessively rouged cheeks, seized the vase of roses and set them on the speaker's table. "A retired psychologist is addressing us today. 'Celestial Skull Anxiety: Nine Surefire Coping Strategies.' I can't wait."

At ten forty-five Nora returned to Phaëthon and studied the



crib sheet. The afternoon's duties were light—a private home in Everett by one, a hospice in Chelsea by three, period. She had plenty of time to call Kevin before grabbing a sandwich and reloading the truck.

A telephone booth stood on the corner of Western Avenue and Harvard Street. Kevin answered on the third ring.

"Hello?"

"It's me," she said. "How're you feeling?"

"Mom, could you come home?"

Nora shuddered. He never called her Mom, only Mother. "What's the matter?"

"I'm frightened."

"Frightened?" She tightened her grip on the segmented cable. "Your cold's worse?"

"A boy came to see me today. I'm scared."

"I'll be right there."

When Nora reached the apartment, Kevin was in the bathroom, hunched over the toilet bowl, clutching the slick porcelain. He gasped and shivered. She knelt beside him and cupped her hand around his forehead. His brow was a block of ice. At last a foul blackness came up, shooting from his throat in a stringy mass. The fluid horrified Nora. It was heavy and viscous, like liquid mercury, and redolent of turpentine.

She flushed the toilet. The vomitus became a thick, stinking maelstrom, spiraling clockwise as it descended beneath the streets of Cambridge.

"Can you talk?"

Instead of answering, Kevin heaved once more, spewing a quart of black fluid into the bowl.

"There, there, darling."

At last he spoke, wheezingly, raggedly, the words splitting along their syllabic joints. "A boy visited . . ."

"Visited you, yes."

"Came into . . . my room . . . stood over . . . my bed." He leaned back on his heels, wiping his lips. "Here's the . . . weird part. The boy was . . . he was *me*."

"You had a nightmare."

"He wore my face . . . his skin was white . . . glossy . . . like this toilet."

"We've got to stop these chills. I'll call Dr. Furtado."

"He kept on saying, 'I'm going to climb inside you,' and the fourth time he said it—"

"I'm going to climb inside you?"

"—he dragged me out of bed, pushed hard against me . . . and then he . . . did it, he climbed inside me . . . and I'm scared he'll never leave."

NOTHING WORKED. No matter what antinausea drugs Dr. Furtado prescribed—no matter how high the doses of vitamins or mood elevators—Kevin's symptoms persisted. By day he shivered. Each evening he ejected the same black muck from his stomach. He continued to insist that he'd absorbed "a boy," but whenever the pediatrician questioned him about it, Kevin grew hysterical, screaming, "He's inside me! He's inside me!"

His condition worsened. The mildest perturbation—an inaccurate weather forecast in the *Boston Globe*, the preemption of

Galaxy Squad by a Presidential press conference—made him weep. His skin grew pale, his weight fell. On hearing that the school principal had granted him sick leave, Kevin promptly retired to his room, climbed under the blankets, and stayed there.

Abandoning his initial diagnosis of viral pneumonia compounded by clinical depression, Dr. Furtado resorted to specialists—to hematologists, neurologists, and endocrinologists. They drew Kevin's blood. They tapped his spine. They cultured his saliva, scanned his brain, biopsied his bone marrow, analyzed his urine. Lacking comprehensive health insurance, Nora charged the crisis on her Visa card. The hardest part was the waiting, those cruelly protracted periods between the infliction of some costly new diagnostic procedure and a nurse calling to

HIS BROW WAS A BLOCK OF ICE.
AT LAST A FOUL BLACKNESS
CAME UP, SHOOTING FROM HIS
THROAT IN A STRINGY MASS.

say, "All results negative." The first time Nora heard this phrase, relief surged through her. The seventh time, it made her livid. All results negative, and yet she was living with a fourteen-year-old invalid.

She hated abandoning him during the day, but she couldn't afford caregivers, and her job was essential to whatever dismal future lay before them. While keeping up the minimum Visa payments was easy, one more expensive test would rupture her \$6,500 credit limit, and she'd be forced to borrow from a relative—her aunt Catherine, most likely, who owned a chain of beauty salons.

Returning to her marooned son at day's end, she usually found him sicker than when she'd left. He continued to leak, his every orifice now an outlet for the muck. Words deserted him. His speech descended to a prelinguistic plane. Two successive snorts signaled that he was going to throw up. A prolonged moan meant that his diaper needed changing. From his tongue the paralysis spread to other muscles. His feet became as inert as stones, his hands as useless as flippers. His ball-and-socket joints stopped working, frozen by some physiological equivalent of rust.

The worst part of each day, worse even than the diapering and the muck removal, was the feeding. The procedure went quickly enough—so far, at least, Kevin retained the use of his jaw muscles—but each time she placed the spoon in his mouth, she couldn't help looking at him. There was endless sadness in his eyes, and fear as well, a bone-deep fear of the sort that infected the cataleptics who populated his beloved Edgar Allan Poe movies (he'd collected every available Roger Corman video)—Monsieur Valdemar in *Tales of Terror*, Guy Carrell in *The Premature Burial*, Madelaine in *The House of Usher*.



Each night after dinner, she lifted him from his wheelchair, transferred him to his bed, and performed the prescribed physical therapy, moving his legs in a manner that mimicked walking, his arms in the pattern of brachiation. Then she would tuck him in and sit beside him on the floor, holding his hand and telling him she loved him. Gradually his room, previously off limits to Nora by virtue of a judicious mother-son treaty, became etched in her mind. He'd been in transition when the illness struck, the accoutrements of childhood—military models, Lego tableaux, Hollywood action figures—giving ground to CDs, rock-star posters, handheld computer games, and other such treasures from Uncle Douglas. In recent weeks she'd embellished the place, filling it with potpourri jars and rejected

cuttings from work. Unlike most boys, Kevin loved flowers. The nectars, as he put it, "took him to other planets," and bouquets routinely appeared in Kevin the Incredible's magic act.



KEVIN WALKED INTO
THE PARLOR, MILK-WHITE
AND COMPLETELY UNCLOTHED.
"I'M NOT KEVIN," SAID KEVIN.

The night that Quincy Azrael first manifested himself began like any other. Nora tucked Kevin in, exercised his limbs, and lingered. His breathing soothed her. She kissed his cheek, then shuffled into the parlor. Easing herself into the vinyl lounge chair, she propped her feet on the ottoman and attempted to disappear into *Threading the Labyrinth*, a novel that purported to retell the myth of the Minotaur in modern dress. Fixed in the cold November sky, the Cranium Dei shone through her lace curtains. It was the Chrysler Corporation's turn to lease His brow. PLYMOUTH INVICTUS: YOUR CHARIOT TO THE STARS.

Kevin walked into the parlor, milk-white and completely unclothed, balancing his plastic model of the aircraft carrier *Enterprise* on his palm.

"Darling!" Nora, gasping, clutched *Threading the Labyrinth* to her breast and rose. "Oh, Kevin, sweetheart . . ."

"I'm not Kevin," said Kevin.

Legs working! Tongue healed! "Darling, you're all better!"

"Kevin's in his room." He sat on the ottoman. His chalky skin lay taut across his chest, all twenty-four ribs lumping outward like the black keys on a piano. "I'm Kevin's fetch."

"What?"

"His fetch. His leveler. His pale priest. His death."

"You shouldn't say things like that."

"Mutual understanding will not come easily, Mrs. Burkhardt, but you must grasp one truth at the outset. I cannot be bargained with."

"Stop talking crazy, sweetheart. It isn't healthy."

The boy lifted the aircraft carrier to his lips and blew, launching the little bombers, fighters, and torpedo planes toward the ceiling. "A plague has begun, and Kevin is its first victim." The planes fell to the floor, caught fire, and turned into kernels of charred plastic. "Your son is riddled with nihilism. He has contracted the abyss. He has caught death awareness, with attendant vulnerability to lethal malaise and malignant despair." The stench of burning polystyrene filled the room. "How far will the pestilence spread? No one can say. Millions of us stand waiting in the wings, and we shall flourish as long as God's skull hangs over the West. Call me Quincy Azrael."

Nora closed her eyes. *Threading the Labyrinth* slipped from her grasp and thudded onto the carpet. For the first time since its advent, she doubted that the manifestation was Kevin. "I find this . . . very difficult."

"We live in difficult times. Theism is fading from the West, and with it the lie of heaven. Look out the window. Behold His hollow eyes, His gaping nostrils, His skinless grin. A bulwark has been thrown down, Mrs. Burkhardt. Death can no longer be denied. My species is leaking into the world."

Nora stared at the black lumps that had once been plastic airplanes. Who was this terrible boy, this Quincy Azrael who so obscenely resembled her son? Kevin's fetch, his leveler, his . . . death. A wave of nausea rolled through her. She took a breath and pressed her sweating fingers against her stomach.

"We never abandon our hosts for long," said Quincy, rising. "It gives them delusions of remission."

He drifted into the hallway, Nora right behind.

Not since she was a toddler had walking been for her such a conscious and deliberate act. Left foot forward. Now the right. The left. The fetch trailed his scent behind him, a blend of humus and rotting leaves.

"Three months ago somebody stuck a magnifying glass in Kevin's cereal," she said.

"The absence of God is God enough.' Plus a caveat concerning cognitive snares and an appeal to the virtues of uncertainty."

"You did it."

"Not I, no."

"Of course it was you."

"Why should I communicate using granite tombs"—the fetch stepped into Kevin's room—"when you and I can have such stimulating conversations face to face?"

She crossed the threshold and saw her sleeping son. She glanced at Quincy, returned her gaze to Kevin. It was true. The boy had a private demon. Her throat constricted as if caught in a garrote. Tears blurred her vision, warming her cheeks as they fell.

"Our first meeting went well, don't you think?" said Quincy, crawling onto the bed. "I was afraid you'd start throwing things at me." He pointed to the black muck bubbling from Kevin's mouth. "Fear syrup," he explained. With his index finger he transferred a viscous blob to his tongue. "Sartre sauce. To a fetch, it tastes like honey."

Poised atop Kevin's chest, a crouching gargoyle, Quincy began his descent. The resulting image, unmatched in Nora's experience, suggested some everyday disgorgement (yolk falling

from a cracked eggshell, seared bread shooting from a toaster) made bizarre through reverse-motion photography. A mere twenty seconds, and Kevin and his fetch were fused. The boy didn't wake up. He lay on the mattress, grimacing, trembling, his brain possessed by some primordial nightmare, his spasms turning the sheets into wild eddies of cloth.

Nora embraced her child. Gradually his dream dissolved. She released her grip and swallowed a mouthful of sooty East Cambridge air.

"You're mine, Kevin," she said. "Not his. Mine."

Charging into the parlor, she snatched up the telephone handset and called her closest relation.

Kind and loving brother that he was, Douglas overcame his initial Lutheran horror of Nora's story—his instinct that she'd become Satan's pawn—and listened until two in the morning. He was warm and supportive, and his concluding remark enabled her to shed her supposition of insanity and get some sleep that night.

"I'm looking out my window, and I see God's skull telling me to buy a Plymouth Invictus, and I say to myself, anything's possible these days, absolutely anything, including an invasion of zombies."

AT 8:12 P.M. on Valentine's Eve, Nora locked up the Tower of Flowers. She climbed into Phaëthon, drove home, and, after feeding and exercising Kevin, took him to Jamaica Plain (she never left her son alone at night) and placed him in Uncle Douglas's care. Returning to the shop, she began to undo the damage.

By virtue of their sheer numbers, the day's customers—scores of perplexed but well-meaning males for whom the language of flowers was largely foreign—had practically destroyed the place. The displays were a total jumble. Slushy footprints marred the floor. Somebody had shattered a grow-light bulb, littering the platform with glass fragments. The shoppers' children had festooned the checkout counter with depleted wads of bubble gum and semidissolved lollipops.

"As you probably know," said Quincy Azrael, "Valentine's Day, like so many festivals on the Christian calendar, has pagan roots."

Nora looked up from her sweeping. Surrounded by red dahlias, the pale, terrible boy sat on the nearest display table, naked as before, exuding the odor of loam.

"Aztec lovers," said Quincy, "used to exchange warm, dripping human hearts, recently torn from the chests of captive warriors. Such a romantic civilization."

"Kevin's getting worse."

"What did you expect? Do you think this is a game? Do you doubt my powers? With a snap of my fingers I could change these dahlias into a dung heap or your broom into a cobra."

Quincy snapped his fingers. Nora's broom changed, becoming not a cobra but a tall stalk of coagulated fear syrup.

"You want to strangle me, don't you?" said the fetch. "You want to spear me through the heart with that shepherd's crook. Impossible. Death is immortal. We are compacted ectoplasm, Jehovic Jell-O, the mattress that muted the princess's pea. Bullets only tickle us. Arsenic simply makes us sneeze."

She threw down the stick of fear. It hit the floor and shattered.

"Three messages," said Quincy. "A brief for humility, filed by

Oliver Cromwell. I've always found politics tedious. An epigram concerning the absence of God. Theology bores me as well. A joke about being trapped in a fortune-cookie factory. Now *jokes* I can relate to. A skeleton goes into a bar, wobbles up to the bartender, and says, 'Hey, gimme a beer and a mop.' The fetch's lips parted in a smile as mocking as God's. "You're not laughing, Mrs. Burkhart."

"Is there any way you could—"

"Take you instead? No. Sorry. You can't die another person's death for him. The metaphysics gets too complicated." The leveller's smile stopped. "In a year the streets will be crawling with my species, a fetch for every man, woman, and child in the Western world."

"You're planning to kill us all?"

"If we can possibly manage it. Speaking personally, I shall be sorry to see Western civilization disappear. I think it was a hoot, especially the Stanley Cup and stud poker. Want to hear another joke?"

"No."

"A woman telephones a mortuary to arrange for her husband's funeral. 'But you buried your husband two years ago!' the undertaker protests. 'I got married again—this is for my second husband,' she explains. 'Oh, I didn't know you'd remarried,' the undertaker replies. 'Congratulations!'" The fetch rearranged the dahlias. "And still no smile from Mrs. Burkhart. Do you know your problem, lady? You refuse to look on the lighter side of bottomless pits. Not everybody takes your high-and-mighty attitude. Follow me."

She stomped on the syrup fragments, then allowed Quincy to guide her out of the showroom, through the back office, and into the vacant lot behind the shop. Bathed in moonlight, the abundant trash—discarded mattresses, castaway automobile tires, fifty-five-gallon drums—seemed almost luminous. A thousand bits of broken glass sparkled like polished gems.

"Do you and Kevin talk?" she asked.

"Of course. I'm his only companion. *He*, at least, laughs at my jokes."

"Tell Kevin I—"

"You love him. A reasonable request. Happy to comply."

"Thank you."

"I might be irredeemably evil, but I'm not all bad."

Quincy gestured toward the far corner of the lot, where a brown Dumpster rose from the bare earth like a witch's crock pot. An emaciated, rheumy-eyed man approached the steel bin, pushing a corroded grocery cart, its cage containing a shoe, a boot, a raincoat, a flashlight, a windup alarm clock. Reaching the Dumpster, he stood on tiptoes and peered inside.

"His name is Angus McPherson—a total nobody, just another old man without a home," said Quincy.

The derelict pulled out a tattered umbrella.

"Before the epidemic peaks, medical science will realize that fetches, like malignant tumors, come in many varieties. Some, such as your son's, act slowly. But others can fulfill their obligations in minutes."

As Angus McPherson dropped the umbrella in his grocery cart, his naked double limped toward him. The interloper was frailer even than McPherson himself, bony as the mannikin in



Kevin's Forgotten Prisoner of Otranto trick.

"Hello, Angus," said McPherson's fetch.

"We have an appointment, don't we?" said McPherson.

"Yes. Sorry."

"It's all right. I've got no reason to go on living, except maybe one."

"I know all about it."

"You do?"

"Yes. The Red Sox are never going to win another pennant."

"Never?"

"Never."

"Take me."

The fetch extended his skinny arms, gates on the portal to oblivion. Smiling, McPherson stepped over the threshold. For a full minute the two stood pressed against each other, melding millimeter by millimeter into a single entity.

"The disease always follows the same course," said Quincy. "First comes the chill, engulfing the patient like an arctic tide."

McPherson shivered.

"The patient attempts to expel the wraith but ejects only copious quantities of fear syrup."

The victim heaved, spewing out a familiar black fluid.

"Next comes a crippling of the voice box and paralysis in all four limbs."

The victim let out a choked cry and stumbled, falling to the ground like a marionette whose puppeteer had been shot through the head.

"Followed by the worst case of boils since Job."

Sprawled on his back, McPherson watched in mute terror as red lesions erupted all over his body. Exploding one by one, the sores released their cargos of pus, the viscid exudate dribbling down his face and chest. Sickened, Nora turned away. Kevin had already endured so much—did this torture too lay before him? Was there no mercy left, not a single mote of it, within the Cranium Dei?

Staggering across the lot, she slumped onto a tattered mattress and buried her face in her hands.

"The boils collapse and dry out, leaving a hundred black pocks. Look up, Mrs. Burkhart! You're missing the pocks!"

Nora wept.

"The flesh splits. The fissures spread among the dried lesions, connecting pock to pock, and then at last . . ."

Nora glanced toward McPherson's corpse. It swam in her tears. Rising, she picked up a half-empty beer bottle and hurled it against the Tower of Flowers, staining the wall with Guinness stout.

"Now let me tell *you* a joke," she said.

"Whatever his intellectual limitations," said Quincy, "McPherson knew better than to fight the inevitable."

"An old woman walks up a steep mountain path with a heavy load of wood balanced on her shoulders. Finally she can stand it no longer. She throws down her burden, raises her arms toward heaven, and cries out, 'I want the Angel of Death to come!' Instantly the Angel appears before her, terrible in form and visage. 'You called?' says the Angel. 'Yes,' the old woman replies quickly. 'Will you help me get this load back on my shoulders?'"

"Not funny," said Quincy.

"Maybe you don't get it."

"Surrender to the Footman, Mrs. Burkhart. Kiss the pale priest. Embrace the abyss."

"Fuck you," said Nora to her son's death.

AS THE MALICIOUS month of September ran its course, succeeded by an equally cruel October and a sadistic November, Nora took qualified comfort in the fact that Kevin now had company in his suffering. The existential pestilence had arrived in force, sweeping across the industrialized world like a thousand Mongol hordes, thrusting Western civilization into nihilism's icy grip.

It had a name now, plus a symptomatology, a prognosis, and a diagnostic procedure. Dr. Cyrus Armbruster of Johns Hopkins University, the first physician to describe the disease in the professional literature, coined the term "abulic plague"—from *abulia*, meaning "loss of will." The label prospered beyond its initial appearance in *Epidemiology Review*, entering common parlance in a matter of weeks. Dr. Gertrude Luckenbach of the Salk Institute discovered a heretofore unknown antigen in the bloodstreams of abulia-infected individuals, a protein she dubbed "Nietzsche-A" in the *Proceedings of the Mayo Clinic*. Thanks to Luckenbach's insight and a concomitant fluorescent antibody test, doctors could now identify "true abulics," as opposed to the terrified multitudes who merely *imagined* they'd seen their deaths. Dr. Nalin Chatterjee of the national Centers for Disease Control, writing in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, argued for distinguishing Nietzsche-positive patients from those who'd progressed to "thanocathexis," the phase during which a fetch periodically took up residence in its host. Thanocathexis itself comprised four stages, the initial chills and vomiting leading to a near-comatose state of aphasic quadriplegia, after which came abscesses, then a web of pocks and fistulas. The Nietzsche-positive, thanocathected abulia victim was generally regarded as terminal, though a minority of these patients, Kevin Burkhart among them, clung to life.

For those thousands of Americans and Europeans in the crepuscular condition of having met their fetches without experiencing thesxis, such encounters across the death barrier became prime topics of conversation. This sociological phenomenon impressed itself on Nora during the dinner party that Ray Ornstein threw for himself in honor of his decision to sell the Tower of Flowers and retire.

It was a swank affair, lit by candles and facilitated by caterers, though like many swank affairs of late, it occurred in the valley of the shadow of death. Released by the various wines—French, German, and Italian vintages in vertiginous rotation—the fetch stories poured forth, increasing in length and complexity after Nora announced that none need sanitize their narratives for her sake.

"I met mine during the Super Bowl," said Dick Aronson, the mechanic who kept Phaëthon on the road. "I'm watching the game—right?—and suddenly there's this shriveled old guy beside me on the sofa, wearing my face. The *Newsweek* story's just appeared, so I know who it is. I try acting calm. I'm rooting for Dallas," I tell him. 'How about you?' Constantine, that's his name, he looks at me, and he says, 'Sometimes with a song, but always with a smile, the bottomless pit beckons.' I figure he's a Steelers fan. The game continues, and I keep hoping to start a

conversation, like at halftime, when I say, 'Them cheerleaders sure are built,' but all I get back is 'The pit implodes, sucking us to oblivion's core.' Finally things get hot, twenty-six seconds left, fourth and goal. If the Cowboys score, they win. The huddle. The formation. The snap. And suddenly my TV goes kablooe. I say, 'Hey, dammit, did *you* do that?' Constantine says, 'Taking football seriously is pathological.'

"You think *you've* got a mean one," said Karen Whitcomb, Ray's thin and ethereal married sister. "Two months ago I'm in the Star Market, produce section, squeezing the cantaloupes. Suddenly there's a woman standing alongside me. Naturally I assume she's choosing a melon, but then I notice she's got no head on her shoulders. She's holding it in her hands, and it's *my* head, and the thing's *talking* to me. 'Kafka put it well,' says the head. 'The meaning of life is that it ends.' I got so scared, I bolted and I kept on running and running. I had to send Lloyd back for the car."

"Mine's even worse," said Ruthie Dart, Nora's coworker. "It's late at night, and I'm at the automatic teller, making a withdrawal, four twenties and a ten. A voice behind me says, 'I'll take that,' so I turn around, holding the cash, and of course it's my Sophie. 'What do *you* want with money?' I ask. 'The abyss needs aluminum siding,' she says, and then the whole ninety bucks goes flying out of my hands and bursts into flames."

"They aren't always nasty," said Milton Stritch, the brawny director of the West Somerville Funeral Home and undeniably the shop's best customer. "Mine recommended a therapist to me, Lionel Pritchard in Newton, and I couldn't be more pleased. I've been through a lot of personal growth lately."

WHEN SHE PICKED UP KEVIN LATER THAT NIGHT, SHE ASKED HER BROTHER, "DO YOU BELIEVE THEY'RE INVINCIBLE?"

"Mine told me where to get my hair done," said Joyce Chumly, Ray's next-door neighbor.

"Mine added a deck to the house," said Harold Ornstein, Ray's brother as well as Nora's gynecologist.

"You've got to be careful," said Avery Bloch, the FTD sales rep. "Last Thursday, mine offered to mow the lawn. He mowed it, all right—straight down to the dirt, and then he kept on going. My yard looks like Flanders field after World War One."

Nora, angry, consumed three swallows of Chardonnay in a single gulp. She liked her present companions, but she found their banter outrageous. It was obscene to be spinning after-dinner anecdotes from humankind's incipient extinction, as if the invaders were no more than a bunch of annoying relatives—dithery Aunt Agatha who knitted during your wedding, forgetful Uncle Willie who gave you a crystal punch bowl every Christmas.



"I have a confession to make," said Derrick Lane, the lantern-jawed, garrulous accountant who did Ray's taxes each year. An open homophile, Derrick had always impressed Nora as having assimilated his proclivities with a dignity far surpassing the average heterosexual's accommodation to conventional desire. "Last week, my boss told me to go fuck myself, and I thought, 'That's exactly what I'm doing.'"

"You're not the only one in that situation," said Ray's unmarried sister, Judith. All around the table, eyebrows lifted. Ray spat a Swedish meatball onto his plate. Judith asked Derrick, "What's it like for you?"

"Ambiguous," the accountant replied. "We understand each other's needs, but Roderick is cold to the touch, and he never wants to talk afterward."

"I've got the same problem with Veronica," said Judith.

"Judith," muttered Ray.

"Later," said Judith.

"These stories are all fascinating, but I have a question," said Milton Stritch. "Are the fetches merely here to torment us, or do we have something they need?"

"What could a fetch possibly *need*?" asked Avery Todd.

"Acceptance, perhaps," said Hubert Whitcomb, Ray's diffident brother-in-law. "Have any of us really tried befriending our levelers?"

"Don't even *think* about it!" screamed Christine Onsa, a crisp woman in her early seventies who each spring grew daylilies and Siberian irises in her backyard and then sold them to the Tower of Flowers. "They're *not* our friends!" The source of Christine's distress was common knowledge. Her granddaughter, a beautiful young concert pianist of Carnegie Hall caliber, had lain in a state of stage-three thesis for nearly a year. "They'll never be our friends!"

"I'm sorry," said Hubert, chagrined.

Christine had it exactly right, Nora felt. But

because the levelers were evil, did it follow that they were invincible? Like Thetis dipping Achilles into the Styx and neglecting to inoculate his heel, had the Angel of Death unintentionally cursed his minions with some secret vulnerability?

When she picked up Kevin later that night, she asked her brother, "Do you believe they're invincible?"

The boy lay slumped in his wheelchair, boils oozing.

She knew what Douglas's answer would be. In his view, abulia was simply the most recent visitation from the repertoire of plagues that God (the true, invisible God, not the skyborne death's-head) stood ready to inflict on sinners, a series that in biblical times had ranged from the hemorrhoids that punished the Philistines for seizing the Ark to the contagion that destroyed Sennacherib's army before it could capture Jerusalem.

"Fight them?" he said. "Bad idea. We must submit to the fetches or risk an even greater wrath. What about you, Nora? Do you think they're invincible?"

"My rational side says we're licked," she replied, wheeling Kevin toward Phaëthon. "And I beseech myself, in the bowels of Christ, to think it possible I may be mistaken."

IT WAS INEVITABLE, Nora realized in retrospect, that the United States government would attempt a technological solution to nihilism. For over half a century, Americans had reflexively deployed mechanical ingenuity against the fact of death. Better respirators. Superior pacemakers. If all else failed: cryonic suspension. As the appalling year 2005 unfolded, the Pentagon set its sights on a new enemy, abulia, and the Joint Chiefs wouldn't rest until they'd blown the Cranium Dei to bits.

Although Nora was doubtful that they could bring God down, she decided to watch the TV coverage anyway. Ruthie Dart came over for the broadcast, toting a bag of pretzels and a six-pack of Saranac. The women sat on the couch, feet on the coffee table, Kevin dozing beside them in his wheelchair. CNN, PBS, and the entertainment networks all carried the historic event live. The women ultimately chose ABC, reasoning that any organization so adept at presenting professional sports would also do Armageddon right.

According to the commentator, the eternally chipper Ronald Glass, the strategists had never seriously considered atomic weapons. The thermonuclear option had prospered in the Pentagon for only two days. A sky clogged with deadly radioactive waste, the particles sifting down to Earth and poisoning the biosphere, was not demonstrably preferable to a sky dominated by a Cranium Dei.

THE NAVY'S UNSUCCESSFUL ASSAULT MARKED THE END OF SYSTEMATIC HUMAN RESISTANCE TO THE PLAGUE.

The attack would consist of a dozen guided missiles, each bearing ten independently targetable warheads, the salvos to occur at seven-minute intervals from a Polaris submarine cruising off Cape Cod. An uncommon patriotic thrill overcame Nora as the first missile arced heavenward, ejected its booster, shed its second stage, and spewed out its warheads. Forty-five seconds later, the bombs struck the sacred skull just below the WINDOWS 2005 advertisement (Microsoft being His present tenant) and exploded in perfect synchronization—a direct hit, according to ABC's array of orbiting cameras. A huge red fireball blossomed on God's bony brow like a physician's headband mirror catching the sunlight.

"Touchdown!" shouted Ronald Glass.

"Hooray!" screamed Ruthie.

"Way to go, Navy!" cried an elated Nora.

But God was a mighty fortress. Whatever the components of His forehead, they would not succumb to TNT. When the smoke cleared and the debris dissipated, the cameras disclosed, in Ronald's words, "not a scratch."

The rest of the strike proved equally impotent. Ten more payloads hit home; ten more ineffectual explosions filled Nora's TV screen. Skewed by a minor navigation error, the twelfth and final salvo made for the divine jaws. The warhead cluster struck His mouth squarely, lodging between His left canine and the corresponding bicuspid, as if the U.S. Navy was currently running a dental practice, but the subsequent blasts failed to dislodge either tooth.

"Shit," said Nora.

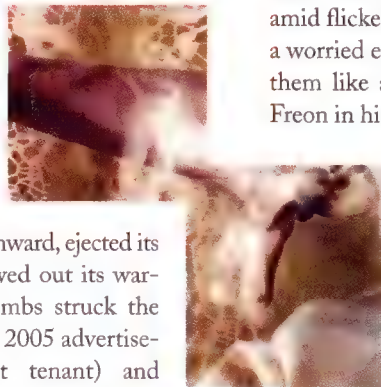
"Let's have another beer," said Ruthie.

As it turned out, the Navy's unsuccessful assault marked the end of systematic human resistance to the plague. After that fateful night, the levelers' toll increased logarithmically. Each day fifty thousand victims tested Nietzsche-positive, while another fifty thousand suffered invasion by their fetches. Stunned by death awareness, paralyzed by stage-two thexis, Western civilization stopped functioning. Laborers, clerks, technicians, bureaucrats, politicians, executives—no level of society enjoyed a respite from the wraiths.

With Sophoclean inexorability, the American infrastructure unraveled. The first losses were subtle. Here and there, a radio station went off the air. Advertisements ceased appearing on God's brow. Supermarkets stopped offering frozen vegetables. Service stations no longer stocked spark plugs or motor oil. Drugstore inventories declined, with laxatives, tampons, suntan lotion, dandruff shampoo, and mouthwash vanishing altogether. Worse followed. Public transportation became a thing of the past, from the fanciest jetliner to the humblest crosstown bus. Shoes became as rare as four-leaf clovers, toilet paper as scarce as Mark McGwire's rookie card. Gasoline disappeared. Credit cards yielded to currency. The Internet died in gibberish, the Web in abstract expressionism. So many professional athletes had been thected that the NBA Championships and the World Series were both canceled. Power plants, telephone companies, and fuel-oil distributors suspended their services. Huddled amid flickering candles in naked kitchens, New Englanders cast a worried eye on the calendar, toward a winter bearing down on them like a Fifth Horseman of the Apocalypse, a rider with Freon in his arteries and an icicle hanging from each nostril.

Then the deaths began. Throughout the West, *Homo sapiens* staggered beneath the twin burdens of bereavement and interment. Whenever Nora stepped outside, she saw that the Sanitation Department's newly formed Pallbearers Corps had resorted to yet another disposal method. Fresh Pond was now a mass grave, its macabre contents dissolving beneath a frosting of quicklime. Dead abulics clogged the Charles River like an immense beaver dam. Decaying corpses so totally obscured Cambridge Common that a film director in possession of a gantry, a 35mm camera, and Vivien Leigh would have had no difficulty replicating the famous railroad-yard crane shot from *Gone With the Wind*.

In every affected city, from Honolulu to Kiev, Saskatoon to Buenos Aires, mere animal survival became the rule. Neither time nor energy existed for burying the dead, reviling the fetches, or rebuilding the world. Starvation ruled like a psychotic king, its toll enhanced by the cruel fact that anyone fool-



ish enough to devour an abulic's remains invariably succumbed to the plague in a matter of days. The needle of humanity's moral compass spun crazily and then fell off the dial. Altruism went the way of the trilobites. Compassion imploded. On a bad day, you lay abed, vibrating with hunger and despair. On a good day, you looted your neighbor's vegetable patch, plundered his pantry, and shot his dog, consuming the feast that followed with an equivocation unworthy to be called guilt.

Rumors buzzed about the dying civilization like the flies who stood to inherit it. Researchers in Paris had discovered a cure. No, the Paris team could merely forestall stage four, while the cure lay in Rotterdam. London held the antidote. San Diego. For whatever reasons, Portugal had proven immune to the plague. Let us flee to Lisbon. No, Portugal had an unusually high death rate, but Switzerland was exempt. Somehow we must get to Geneva. Throughout the Balkan peninsula, Dionysian anarchy had taken hold (eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow our levelers claim us). These tales of sybaritic rites were true, but the bacchanals were limited to Albania. Greece, actually.

For Nora Burkhart, one piece of hearsay loomed above the others, a shining possibility into which she poured the shredded remnants of her faith. She wasn't sure why she'd elected to pin her hopes on this particular story. It was more complex than the competing rumors, but that hardly made it more plausible.

Somewhere in the jungles rimming the Gulf coast of Mexico, beyond the harbor town of Coatzacoalcas, a unique scientific-religious institution had arisen. At the Lucido Clinic, thected abulics learned a mental discipline called Somatocism, subsequently cleansing their psyches of death awareness. A plague family could get its stricken loved one into the Somatocist temples only if they arrived bearing a valuable donation. Diesel fuel almost always bought a victim admittance. So did vintage wines, exotic foods, precious gems, priceless art, and fancy clothes.

"I'm going to Mexico," she told Douglas, "and I'm taking Kevin with me."

"Coatzacoalcas is three thousand miles away," he said. "How will you get there? Skateboard?"

"Phaëthon."

"There's no gasoline."

"I have a plan."

"I don't want to hear about it."

"All I need are a wheelbarrow, a Siemens siphon, a couple of shovels, and a helpful brother."

THE MAIN GATE of Arborway Cemetery was padlocked, so they had to heave the wheelbarrow and tools over the wrought-iron fence, then scale it using the scrollwork for footholds. Reaching the top, Nora apprehensively surveyed the metal pickets, so reminiscent of the arrows that Eric had employed in the Martyrdom of Sebastian, his grisliest trick. She steeled herself. At last she jumped—and was fortunate to fall, along with Douglas, into the embrace of a barberry bush.

Scrambling to their feet, they collected their tools, dropped them into the barrow, and started across the graveyard.

"We shouldn't be doing this," Douglas whispered.

"Who's watching us?" she replied, tightening her grip on the

barrow handles. "Santa Claus? The Tooth Fairy? God?"

"God is watching us, yes."

"In school I learned that eyeballs are among the minimum requirements for vision."

"When you look at the Cranium Dei, Nora, you see God's face. When I look at it, I see Satan's mask."

With abulia's ascent, the art of grave digging had fallen into amateur hands, and Arborway Cemetery was now an unsightly mass of pits and heaps, like a prairie dog town built by insane prairie dogs. Wandering amid the maze, Nora noticed that many of the plague victims were only partially buried, their black and rigid limbs jutting grotesquely into the air. Finally she reached Dexter Gansevoort's resting place, with its exquisite Korty Madonna cradling a sickly marble Jesus. A bouquet of gardenias leaned against the elaborate monument—nothing like the floral cornucopia Nora had delivered almost three years earlier, but impressive by plague-era standards.

They got to work. Nora dug furiously, daunted by neither hunger nor exhaustion. Douglas, too, threw himself into the task, and by eleven o'clock a third of the buried Cadillac Catera lay exposed to the foul summer air. Through brute luck they'd chosen the gas-cap side. Their good fortune made Douglas hum and Nora laugh. Slouching against the cool dirt wall, they set down their spades, gathered their strength, and listened to the low, hoarse sound of poplar branches scratching the granite mausoleums.

"I thought he'd smell," said Douglas.

"The windows are rolled up," Nora explained.

Predictably, the gas cap was locked, but they'd come prepared. Nora held the flashlight while Douglas wielded the hammer and chisel. Seven blows, and the fuel tank was theirs. Eagerly they inserted the rubber tube and switched on the Siemens siphon, powered by four C batteries from Kevin's toy robot. When the first ounces spurted into the milk jug, brother and sister cheered in unison. The gasoline kept coming, and within five minutes they had successfully pirated an entire gallon.

As the night deepened, they repeated the procedure, again and again, until nine jugs of Gansevoort high-test sat along the edge of the hole like severed heads ringing a chopping block. The grave robbers were filling jug number ten when a male voice exploded from the darkness.

"Hold it right there!"

Nora directed the flashlight beam toward the intruder. A young man, stripped to the waist and skinny as a whippet's fetch, stood on the far edge of the pit, gripping a revolver. His smile, like God's, was scornful.

"Guess you had the same idea as me," said the young man. "These rich people, they can afford the really good embalmers. The best-preserved meat in Massachusetts." His face suddenly contorted, a caricature of astonishment. "Hey, you're Mrs. Burkhart. I had you for ninth-grade English. Remember me? Curtis Padula?"

"I remember you," said Nora, climbing out of the grave. Though not fondly, she was tempted to add. Curtis had been one of those semiliterate slouchmasters who read *Strumpet* magazine under his desk and fell asleep in class. "Stop pointing that gun at me, Curtis."



"Mrs. Burkhart, wow, I never imagined meeting *you* here."

For Nora it was a familiar phenomenon: the student who was amazed to discover that his teachers pursued lives outside the classroom.

"The gun, Curtis."

The revolver remained frozen. Cradling the Siemens siphon, Douglas exited the hole and joined his sister on the grass.

"You don't need that," said Curtis, indicating the siphon. "I've done experiments. Hang the corpse upside down from a road sign, slit the throat, and the formaldehyde runs out like sap from a maple tree."

"Like sap from a maple tree," echoed Nora. "An impressive simile, Curtis. What did I give you?"

"A fucking C-minus."

"You could've earned a B." Cautiously she began loading the milk jugs into the wheelbarrow. "Did anything from our Greek Mythology unit stay with you?"

"'Fraid not."

"Nothing at all?"

"I remember Zeus had a really busy pecker." Keeping his gun trained alternately on Nora and Douglas, Curtis approached the monument and leaned against the Korty Madonna's hip. "Your husband?"

"Brother. What about Jason and the Golden Fleece? Icarus and Daedalus?"

"Go home, Mrs. Burkhart. These burgers belong to me."

"We came for the gasoline."

"The *gasoline*? Maybe you didn't hear, but the world has ended. There's no place worth visiting anymore."

"Put your gun down, Curtis," she said firmly. "I mean it."

Evidently she'd hit the right note, for Curtis now engaged in the atavistic action of obeying his former teacher, slipping the pistol into his pants pocket.

"You're probably disappointed in me," he said.

"I admire your initiative," she said.

Throughout the rest of the week, Nora and Douglas pursued their careers as gasoline ghouls, exhuming a different Gansevoort each evening and plundering the coffin: motorcycle, speedboat, private plane, stock car. By midnight on Friday they'd stolen the last of the lot, for a total of fifty-two gallons. Assuming she drove Phaëthon slowly and efficiently, she had enough gasoline to reach the Texas-Louisiana border.

"And *then* what?" asked Douglas, siphoning the final ounce of Gansevoort high-test.

"I'll commandeer a horse and buggy," said Nora.

"Brigands will attack you."

"I'll fight them off."

"You need to bring Dr. Lucido a gift."

"I'll find one along the way."

"What'll you eat?"

"I've been stockpiling groceries."

"You'll run out."

"Then I'll drive on an empty stomach."

Douglas set the jug inside the barrow and groaned. "I want you to promise me something. That thing Curtis Padula has been doing—you'd never resort to that, would you?"

"Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian." Herman Melville."

"You've got a quote for everything. It's going to be the death of you."

"Mexico or bust."

Nora realized that, in her brother's eyes, her obsession with the Lucido Clinic bordered on blasphemy. But wasn't blasphemy—raw, bleeding, irredeemable blasphemy—the precise attitude she owed her son?

"No argument I might make will convince you to stay in Massachusetts," he said.

"Quite true," she said.

"No amount of begging."

"None."

"Then I wish you Godspeed, sister."

"God's speed is nine hundred miles per hour, same as the Earth's. When I get to Mexico, I'll send you a postcard." 🍌



about the author

James Morrow's *The Eternal Footman*, published by Harcourt Brace, will give readers Morrow's final meditation on the death of God, a project that also includes the novels *Towing Jehovah*, which won the World Fantasy Award, and *Blameless in Abaddon*, a science fiction retelling of the *Book of Job*.

Morrow, a two-time winner of the Nebula Award, is currently writing *The Last Witchfinder*, a novel about the birth of the Newtonian worldview. His radio play, "Daughter Earth," can be accessed on the Sci-Fi Channel's website, <www.scifi.com>. His own website can be found at <www.sff.net/people/jim.morrow>.

Morrow lives in State College, Pennsylvania, with his wife Kathryn, his son Christopher, and their two dogs Pooka and Amtrak.



about the illustrator

Cliff Nielsen is well known for his book illustrations for *The X-Files* and *The Crow*, and for various DC Comics and Marvel Comics projects. His artwork has embellished the work of nearly a hundred authors, including Edgar Allan Poe, Chris Carter, Robert Heinlein, Madeleine L'Engle, Kevin J. Anderson, and R.L. Stine.

His other contributions to these pages can be found on the cover of issue 597 and in issue 595, which includes his illustration for Eliot Fintushel's "Honey Baby and Mademan."

Amazing facts

THIS MAY 1927 cover of *AMAZING* Stories magazine depicted a scene from "The Star of Dead Love" by Will H. Gray. Dr. Joyce (the person with the headset) is watching a "beautiful being from Venus" attempt to make herself even smaller than she is, in order to fit into the little glass house behind her.

Here's the scoop: Dr. Joyce was sitting on his veranda one day, minding his own business when this "beautiful being" appeared on his lawn, seemingly out of nowhere. Dr. Joyce, (to quote the story) "being a practical man, walked toward the veranda steps and beckoned the form towards the house."

He studied her. They talked. He fed her and she, in turn, showed him how to dematerialize and materialize as a smaller being. Not your typical houseguest, but it worked for them.

May

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*Our mettle is tested, and either we rise or fall.
Eventually, it happens to us all.*

Ascension

JOSE AVILLA approached the temple on confession day with three bouquets of tropical flowers clutched in his arms, a large sheaf of wheat tied to his back, and a gourd filled with goat's milk hanging from a leather cord around his neck. Tradition demanded far less, even for so large a confession as his, but he knew that this year there would not be many pilgrims, and he wanted the temple to look nice for Father Seven.

B Y
R U S S E L L
W I L L I A M
A S P L U N D

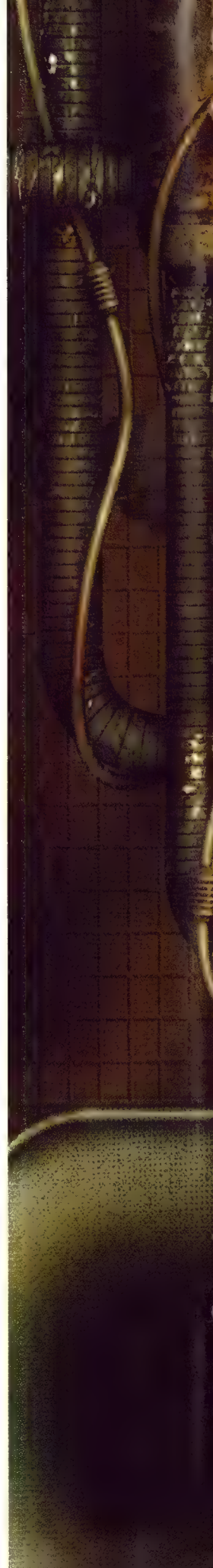
ILLUSTRATION BY
DAVID HO

Though the temple sat at the top of a small mountain, the forest kept it hidden until you were almost upon it. During his youth, the silver monks maintained a clearing around the top of the temple, so the gleaming central building could be seen all the way to the next village, but now it was all Father Seven could do to keep the temple free from the relentless pressure of rust and vines.

Jose stopped to wipe his brow. His legs ached already, and the steepest part of the climb still loomed ahead. Even in the temple's heyday, the path to reach it had not been easy, in order to inspire the proper sense of humility in the frail creatures that made the climb. These days the path had disappeared completely, but Jose knew the way. He actually smiled as he began to walk again, enjoying the blissful green of the forest, the bright-colored birds, and the scent of rotting vegetation. He even enjoyed the burning in his lungs as he climbed. He supposed he would have to confess this as well.

He did not see another pilgrim, even as he got near the temple. He knew things were bad in his village; still, he had hoped a few from the other villages might come. But when he came to the gleaming central courtyard, he saw only Father Seven, alone on his knees polishing its metal surface.

It was a job for acolytes, who still needed to be taught the mortification of the flesh, not for an old priest like Father Seven. Jose paused to wipe the sweat from his balding, sun-baked head—it wouldn't do to sweat here, of all places. He waited for his breathing to subside, then stepped up onto the metal courtyard.





The sun nearly blinded him. The silver monks had built the temple to fit the land. The square metal courtyard stretched for seventy-five yards, an artificial cap to the natural mountain. In the center of the courtyard three stairways of three steps each led to the three narrow corridors that formed the main building—the symbolic peak. Like the ancients before them, the silver monks used the metaphor of the land itself. The artificial capping the natural; first overcoming, then supplanting it. The sight always filled Jose with awe, no matter how often he saw it.

“Hello, Father,” Jose called, his voice echoing across the courtyard. Up here even the smell of the forest faded, replaced by the sharp tang of sun-heated metal. Jose could feel the heat through his sandals. Another weakness of the flesh.

Father Seven turned to look around, and Jose saw that he had been wrong. Father Seven did not rise from his knees as Jose expected; instead he simply swiveled, and Jose saw that the monk had given up on legs since last year. Instead, he wheeled around on two triangular treads, like a tank. It meant that Father Seven was progressing on his spiritual journey. Jose waved as the monk clanked toward him.

“You are looking more unnatural than ever,” he said as Father Seven stopped in front of him.

“Jose, so good to see you. This year even the faithful seem to have forgotten us.”

replaced with order and sense. Simply looking at it made Jose’s stomach clench, like watching someone get kicked in the crotch. Certainly the flesh was weak, but like many other weaknesses, Jose was loath to give it up.

“Forgive me, Father,” he said, holding out his offerings. “I have come to confess my sins.”

He almost swore he could hear Father Seven sigh. “Place your offerings on the altar.”

Jose stepped to one of the two long altars that ran the length of the courtyard, setting his flowers on the raised line of metal. At the ends of each altar, a column of metal rose to form a stela, one at each of the corners of the courtyard. Jose tried to arrange his offerings to the best possible effect, but no matter how hard he tried, the altars still looked stark and bare. It wasn’t right that they stand empty on confession day, he thought.

“I could bring some branches from the trees?” Jose suggested. He took Father Seven’s silence as a refusal and stepped back from the altar.

“Confess,” said the monk.

Jose looked up at the sun. “Shouldn’t we wait until noon? There may still be others.”

“There will be no others, and it is almost noon now. Confess.”

Jose looked down. The sun and sky were reflected in the smooth metal beneath his feet. Even the monk’s silver frame

“They can grow new hands now, like a

“It is the new rejuvenations, Father. They are promising life spans of at least one hundred and fifty years now, with the promise of more to come. Few are willing to make the sacrifices you made to extend your life.”

“Sacrifices?” The anger came across clearly through the metallic voice. “To give up something unreliable and accidental for something planned by the minds God gave us? They are poor, simple fools, as they shall see. Hold out your hand.”

Jose shifted the flowers to his left arm and held out the other. One of Father Seven’s limbs shot out, rapping Jose sharply across the palm. Jose yelled in pain, pulling his bruised hand back.

“Extend its life all you will, the flesh is still a frail vehicle.”

“I know, Father,” Jose said quickly. “Believe me, I know. It’s them you need to teach, not me.”

“I’m sorry, son, perhaps I get carried away. But the sooner you see that flesh is a poor vehicle for your soul, the sooner you can join us on our journey to heaven.”

“I know, Father,” Jose said again, softly. He looked up warily at the main building. The left corridor housed the silver monks, given over to the repair and maintenance of the metallic bodies the monks inhabited until their ascension. The right housed the acolytes, but it had been empty for years. Father Seven had been alone since Father Eight’s ascension nearly five years back.

Still, it was the central building that held Jose’s attention. The central building housed the holy of holies, where flesh was converted to stronger stuff—where nature’s random plan could be

reflected the blue overhead, a white cloud perched like a wig across his scalp. For a moment it felt like he was floating in the sky, standing by an angel; then Father Seven moved and the illusion was broken, the cloud slipping down and away, and Jose once again faced only man-made metal.

“Yes, Father, forgive me, for I have sinned. Since last year I have tried to live the life of the mind, but my body, it has other ideas. I still enjoy my food, and while I have not been with a woman since I lost my wife, I fear that is more because they will not have me than that I will not have them, if you see what I mean.”

Father Seven was silent, his metal face implacable as ever. In the distance, birds called to each other, and the wind whispered in the trees. The sound echoed metallically across the courtyard, like a bad recording.

“Do you want me to go on?”

“No.” Again Jose could sense the sigh in Father Seven’s voice. He had heard it enough as a child, when Father Seven had not been so near ascension. “I doubt the details are much changed from last year. Shall I enter the same confession again?”

Jose nodded humbly.

The priest wheeled himself to the altar. He removed a small plug from the center of his chest and fitted it into the matching socket. Jose bowed his head.

“Let your sins, like this offering, be burned away.”

A flash of blue fire burned its way along the altar. The smell of ozone filled the courtyard, followed quickly by the scent of the burning offerings. Jose let his eyes drift upward and watched as

the gourd of milk exploded, the gourd burning away to ash. For a moment the altar was alive with fractal patterns of blue and yellow fire and swirls of ash.

But it lasted only a moment. Father Seven withdrew the cord into himself, and the altar stood once again bare and gleaming.

"Dust thou art, and to dust thou wilt return, unless you give yourself to the life of the soul."

"Amen," Jose said softly. He remembered other confessions from his youth, before even the first rejuvenations had been offered. The whole village had turned out, and people had covered the altars with offerings. He remembered watching the smoke billow out as the fire raged, sometimes for an hour or more, until the last of the offerings vanished into ash.

But somehow it seemed sadder now, more personal—as if his sins alone stained the altar. He knew the rest of the village stayed away not because they were free of sin, but because they no longer wanted to be free of sin. Yet, it felt as though he alone still carried his own weaknesses. After all, he had watched his wife ascend nearly three years ago. Surely he should have joined her by now.

"Jose?" Father Seven asked.

"Yes, Father?" Jose opened his eyes. Father Seven had rolled nearer.

"How is your hand?"

gaze. He shuffled his feet on the hot metal courtyard. Already his feet felt uncomfortably hot, and he knew that his skin would burn from the reflected rays of the sun.

Father Seven was right—his body was too weak. He remembered his wife on the day of her ascension, flying toward heaven, her new body glistening as it rose—so different from the frail woman he had carried to the temple four short years before. Her cancer-ravaged flesh had almost delivered her soul to the grave in pain and misery. If she was not happy now, it was only because she was beyond such fleshbound things as misery and joy. She lived among the stars now, with the hosts of heaven.

And yet Jose could not help thinking that if she had only managed to live in the flesh three or four more years, the rejuvenation could have cured her and she would still be his. This thought alone was enough to convince Jose that he was not ready for the priesthood.

"I'm sorry, Father. Someday . . ."

"Jose, think carefully." Father Seven began to circle him, and Jose could picture him as he once was, when Jose had been a young man and Father Seven merely a new acolyte. Back then he had looked like an old man, silver and shiny from head to toe. First one gave up the body, then slowly the forms thereof. He could remember the old man lecturing him, warning him away from youthly follies he had nonetheless fallen victim to. Though

starfish. It is part of the rejuvenation."

Jose lifted his arm. "Fine, Father. You didn't hit me that hard." "Not that hand, the other one."

"Oh, of course." Jose lifted his left arm, flexing the hand that glinted in the sun. "I don't even think of it anymore."

The hand was perfectly formed, even down to the fine silver hairs that lined the knuckles. Jose turned it over, watching the play of sunlight across it. It worked so much better than the hand that an accidental slip of the ax had taken last year. Father Seven had called the slip a blessing on the day he gave Jose the new hand.

"They can grow new hands now, like a starfish," Jose said, still looking at his hand. "It is part of the rejuvenation."

"And yet you have not traded yours for flesh."

Jose shrugged. "Why change a hand that works?"

"Indeed. Jose, does that hand ever tire?"

Jose shook his head. In fact, it did not—when he carried milk or hauled hay, his arm would tire, but the hand would not.

"Does it hurt, or burn in the sun?"

Jose shook his head.

"Would you like it if we replaced the other hand as well?"

Jose shrugged. "It's like I said, Father. Why change a hand that works?"

"But it doesn't work, Jose. That is the thinking that keeps you bound to earthly things. How can you do God's work with a hand that tires? How can you stand in the glory of God with skin that burns from the light of the sun?"

Jose looked down at his feet, unable to meet Father Seven's

he no longer resembled a man in form, the voice and tone remained that of his friend.

"Right now, after your confession, you are clean in mind and body. Give up your flesh, that awful curse our first parents brought upon us when they failed God's will. You don't need to suffer pain and death. You think that you are healthy and strong, but already age is taking its toll. You were a young man once, yet look at you now. You wheeze when you walk, your hair has more gray than black. How long do you think before arthritis sets in, or worse?"

"But what you fail to realize is that even in health, you still live with pain and death. Every minute of every day your body struggles against it, struggles to pump blood and air to limbs that otherwise would die, struggles to warm your ever-cooling flesh, fights the losing battle against death and decay.

"Give up the fight, Jose. You are a good man. Come, begin your journey to ascension."

He stopped pacing and held out a hand to Jose. At least Jose thought of it as a hand, though it lacked the proper number of digits and was attached to something more flexible than an arm. Jose did not reach out his own.

"Perhaps I deserve to suffer more."

The silver monk whirled and rolled away. Jose shrugged mutely, struggling for something to say, then turned to walk toward the green of the forest.

"Wait."

Jose could hear Father Seven's treads as they whisked along

the metal ground, like a blade being dragged across a sharpening stone. He turned, momentarily dazzled by the reflections from Father Seven's chest and head. He quickly averted his eyes, spots of blue still dancing where he had been momentarily blinded.

"Jose." Father Seven glided to a stop beside him, and Jose stepped to one side, so the sun was over Father Seven's shoulder. "I wanted to give you the chance to make your decision on your own, uncoerced—it is so much easier that way. And yet I cannot let you go. We need you, Jose, the order needs you. You are a faithful man from a faithful family. I know you will not ignore the call."

"But, Father . . ." Jose began. Father Seven cut him off with a gesture.

"No, first you must listen. We need you, Jose. I am the last. There have been no acolytes for many years, but I cannot put off my ascension forever. There must be someone to carry on the work. Jose, God has chosen you for this."

"Surely there must be someone else."

"Look around you." Father Seven's gesture took in all of the empty courtyard. "There is no one else. Do you know what I found yesterday? Graffiti on the temple—someone snuck in during the night and painted their name on the temple wall on the day before confessions."

Jose was shocked. Simply forgetting he could understand;

Jose. Needed him to give up his weakness.

"Another year, Father. Give me another year to put my house in order."

"There will always be disorder. That is the nature of the curse. Only when you are one of us will you be able to bring order."

"But I need to tell my friends, my children. . . ."

"Come, Jose, you will not ascend tomorrow. I'm only asking you to take the first step. They will know when you come to them, your skin gleaming and strong. They will see, and they will know that you have chosen right."

"You are right, Father, but surely one year will not matter. You have been here alone for years."

"No." Father Seven came closer. "You must understand. When you first put off the flesh, it will feel like a sacrifice. For a while you cling to the old forms, for the comfort they give, the familiarity. Then you begin to forget. You see that there are better ways, and you modify yourself accordingly. Functionality becomes more important than nostalgia."

"But it does not stop there. Soon you begin to feel angry at how inefficient the old form was. You realize what a trick has been played on you, being born in this accidental body, and resent the years you were imprisoned in it."

Father Seven paused. A flock of birds flashed overhead, their red plumage bright against the blue sky.

"I must ascend. Either that or go mad and

with the new breakthroughs in medical science, people were quick to forget the proper observances. It had always been so. But to actively seek out the temple to desecrate it—this was intolerable.

"Who did it? Surely you could find out and they can be stopped. If this were known in the village . . ."

"If the village knew, it would simply encourage others to try. The graffiti is a minor thing; I tell it to you only to show that there is no one else. There will be someday, when the new rejuvenations hit their limit, or when the next plague comes, or when people tire of dying in their cars or trains or falling down the stairs. But until then, someone must carry on."

The sun was directly overhead now, shining up from the surface of the courtyard and casting complicated shadows across Father Seven's skin. Jose could see himself reflected there, distorted by the curving surface of the monk's chest, lit from below so his eyes were nothing but large, dark holes. A bead of sweat rolled from his forehead and down his cheek like a tear. He wiped it away with his left hand. The metal burned on his skin, and he drew it away sharply.

"Will you answer the call?"

"Father, I . . ." Jose gestured mutely. His heart beat loudly in his chest—his flesh heart, his failing heart that would one day weaken and stop. More sweat rolled down his face as he tried to think of a response.

"Please?" Father Seven stood firmly in front of him, strong and patient. Except that this strong man of God needed him,

"Do you know why we ascend, Jose?"

"To be nearer to God," Jose answered automatically. He had been taught this from his youth.

"God is everywhere, Jose. Certainly he does not live above us, any more than he lives below us. In space there are stars and planets, like this one, yet God is no more on any other planet than he is on this one—or any less."

"And yet your answer is correct. So tell me, in what way are those who ascend closer to God?"

Jose shrugged.

Father Seven continued. "A monk ascends when he can no longer stand the presence of evil. Eventually, it happens to us all. The bodies we are surrounded by, the meat and mucus and blood, the rotting and decay, the futile battle of life against death—in the end we can no longer abide it. And so we ascend, that our communion may be made perfect."

"Already I find it difficult to be in your presence. Your stench is overpowering, your softness revolting. This is why acolytes used to deal with pilgrims—so that the monks could live with us as long as possible before ascension. But now there are no acolytes."

"I must ascend. Either that or go mad, and lose the mind that God has given me—despite my abandoning the flesh. Despite my work here. For years I have worked for your salvation; now I ask you to help me with mine. Today I will make my ascension."

"Will you continue my work, Jose? Or will you let it die with me? It is a hard thing I ask, but though your body's weakness

fills me with loathing, yet I know your soul is strong. I ask you as a friend, and as a teacher: Please come?"

Father Seven reached out his hand again, and this time Jose took it with his left hand. Their hands rung gently, like a bell, when they met. Jose longed to see Father Seven smile, for some indication that he was choosing right, but Father Seven was beyond that. He simply turned and pulled Jose behind him.

"I knew you would not fail me, Jose. They need us in the village, although they do not realize it now. For without the ascended monks, who would find new colony worlds? Who would explore the far reaches of space? One day they will realize, and they will flock back to you, ashamed of their rejuvenations."

"But, Father, how can I do it alone?"

"You will not be alone." Father Seven tugged on Jose's arm, eager to move faster, but Jose hung back. He could feel his feet blistering from the heat, but he supposed it did not matter now. He almost enjoyed the pain, and he pressed his weight down on each foot as he walked.

"Those who ascend are not really gone from us. We can hear their words as they commune with God. If they are not too far gone, they can even speak with us, give us direction. Though I will have begun my journey, I will speak to you for as long as I can."

then you will be one of us."

"How long will I be out?"

"If everything goes well, you should be walking about in two days, and able to leave the temple in four—although not for long. You will awake in your room in acolyte hall."

Jose still hesitated at the door. "Father?"

"Yes, my son?"

Jose remembered last year, laid out on the table, the sharp blade severing the remnants of his hand. His mouth was dry. Was he making the right decision?

"Father, I would like one last favor. I would like to see your ascension."

Jose turned from the table and looked out again over the mountains that were his home. "I remember after my wife's ascension, I almost joined the priesthood. Seeing the beauty of her as she rose, I wanted to join her. I think it would make it easier to leave behind what I must leave behind."

"Of course, my son. The computer knows how to do the conversion, and I can talk you through the steps you must take. Now watch, and be instructed, for one day you too will take your flight."

Jose stood just outside the door to the holy of holies as Father Seven entered and laid himself upon the table. He spoke a few ritual words to the computer, and Jose watched as the transfor-

lose the mind that God has given me."

They approached the center of the courtyard, walking parallel to the two great altars until they passed beneath the shadow of the central building. Father Seven led Jose directly to the stairs that led to the holy of holies.

As they climbed, Jose looked over his shoulder, down into the valley where the village stood. His eyes followed the twisting and turning of the small river that ran through the valley, curving and looping in a pattern no mind had planned. From here, the village looked like a giant blossom, spiraling outward from the central square into small petals of streets and farms. A pattern formed here and there—a straight row of houses, a neatly planted field of corn—but the whole thing remained maddeningly complex, growing beyond plans and boundaries like a living thing.

The village, and those like it, had filled the valley for thousands of years. He looked at the peak across the way, and could almost make out the ruins of the temple there that long ago served his ancestors—where they had cut the hearts from victims, willing or not. How would they view his sacrifice, a thousand years from now?

"We are here." Father Seven placed his hand on the door to the holy of holies. It slid back, revealing a long metal table. The sharp chemical smell of the room wafted out in a gust of cool air. Jose touched his artificial hand with his flesh hand, feeling the cold smoothness of the metal.

Father Seven gestured for him to enter the temple. "Lie upon the table. When you awake, you will be given a new name and

mation was completed. The wheeled legs were removed, as was the head and chest. Long metallic arms disgorged from the walls to remove piece after piece until only the smallest of boxes remained. Then the hands began to build.

Gossamer wings were tied to the box, retracted, covered, wrapped in foil, hardened to a shell. Then the whole thing was lifted gently and placed in a polished tube.

Jose ran down the stairs and onto the courtyard, watching as the satellite that was Father Seven was placed atop the holy of holies, a bright metal peak on the flat surface of the roof. It glinted there for a moment. Jose heard Father Seven's voice, seeming to come from all around him. "Thank you, my son."

And then Father Seven made his ascension. Bright goutts of flame shot into the air, wild and furious. A sharp white trail followed the rocket up into the sunlit sky. Jose watched until it was no more than a speck of brightness that might have been his imagination. He imagined the rocket expelling the satellite, imagined as it unfolded its solar wings and began its journey. He hoped that Father Seven would find God wherever he went.

"It is time." Father Seven's voice filtered down from the holy of holies. Jose closed his eyes and ascended the stairs until he entered the cool grayness of the temple.

"Now lie down on the table, and we will begin."

THAT NIGHT Jose sat on a table in the holy of holies while Father Seven spoke to him about the transformation, explaining the machinery that would cut away his flesh, how to prepare his

new body according to his desires, how to care for it. He would answer, "Yes, Father," or "No, Father," until he understood. Until, as the light of morning came, he lay naked on the table beside a silver replica of himself—or himself as he had been many years ago. He had felt free to make improvements.

"Father Seven?" he asked. There was a slight delay as his voice reached the monk. Each day the delay would get longer as Father Seven traveled farther away.

"Yes, my son?"

"If, in your travels, you should chance to meet my wife, will you tell her that I love her?"

"I will tell her that you are traveling to join her."

"No, Father. By the time I ascend, she will be too far ahead. Just tell her that I love her, and that I tried to do what was right."

"I will tell her. She will be proud of you."

Jose shook his head, although he knew Father Seven couldn't see. "No, she is beyond either pride or anger—as you will soon be."

"Are you ready, my son?"

Jose looked around the room, at the gray metal walls, the machinery, the lifeless body beside him. "I will do what must be done."

"Then I will speak to you in a few days."

Jose lay in silence for a while, staring at the ceiling, imagining his friend as he flew toward the stars. "Good-bye, Father."

He waited, then sat up and stepped softly off the table, moving his silver double over to where he had lain. He moved around the room, pressing the buttons as Father Seven had taught him, then watched as mechanical arms slowly dismantled his double—lasers slicing through silver skin, careful hands carrying pieces to the other side of the table, where they went through the motions of placing the pieces into a double that they had just unknowingly destroyed.

Jose turned his back to the proceedings and walked to the door of the temple. Sunlight blinded him as the door opened. He stood there for a moment, aware that if he left now, he would not enter the temple again. No one would, since he would not be there to open the door for them. It was not too late; he could still rebuild another double.

But it was too late—it had been too late even before he came. This land was full of ruined temples, covered by still other temples. The Olmec and the Maya, the Aztecs and the North Americans, all had built their shrines and served the people as they could, and each had crumbled as it outlived its time. Yet each was there still. In the most modern of cities, you still found Mayan customs, which echoed Olmec customs, themselves kept from an earlier era. Each era left its mark on the people, yet each must pass.

Tears streamed down his face as he took the first step toward the courtyard, hearing the door close behind him with a gentle shush. For a moment it seemed that the courtyard stood as it had in his youth, the altars covered with greenery and fine things from the village, but then he saw it was merely the reflection of forest and flowers in the polished metal.

The metal was cool on his feet as he walked across the courtyard. Already he could see the green vines creeping in at the edges, and on the altar a red bird perched, then dropped a pud-

dle of excrement. Already nature was claiming the place that had for so long defied her.

And yet, Jose thought, are not the ascended monks still alive, communing with God? Had not the colonies already been established? And down in the valley, doctors worked still to rejuvenate and improve nature. Men were using what God had given them still.

"I'm sorry, Father," Jose said as he stepped away from the courtyard.

He paused briefly before entering the trees and rubbed his metal hand. It felt heavy, awkward. Perhaps next year he would go to the rejuvenation center. He turned his back to the temple and headed down toward the village. 🌿



about the author

Russell William Asplund, a former first-place winner in the Writers of the Future Contest, has had stories appear in Realms of Fantasy, Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, and in the anthology Silver Birch, Blood Moon. Asplund works as a multimedia programmer and is a partner in Candesa Interactive, a small software company. In his spare time he collects music, reads far too many books, and tries to find time to write. He lives in Utah with his wife and four children.



about the illustrator

David Ho's art has been seen in various publications including Mac Art & Design, Computer Artist, CMYK, Juxtapoz, Carpe Noctem, Spectrum, and the 1999 Applied Arts Illustration Annual. He has also received a Silver Award from the San Francisco Society of Illustrators 1999 Annual Show. He recently released a how-to art book in Asia titled The Digital Illustrations of David Ho, published by Sungood Books. To see more of his work, visit his website at www.davidho.com.

Amazing facts

JANET AGREED TO MARRY a Martian to escape an overcrowded Earth. But she never intended to honor their contract. Marko, the misshapen alien farmer who had fallen for her at first sight, was an honorable being—he let her go without a fight, despite the handsome price he had paid. Little did Janet know that she was in for horrors worse than her reviled spouse. After leaving their home, she found herself auctioned off to a Martian madam for a life of slavery and prostitution.

Love wins out in the end. The faithful Marko, fearing for Janet's welfare, pursues her, reaching his despairing wife just in time to see her jump from a window. She breaks a lot of limbs in the fall, but lives to fulfill her marital contract.

This story, "Blonde Cargo" by Adam Chase, appeared in the January 1958 issue of AMAZING Stories.

BLONDE CARGO

SCHOOL FOR ASSASSINS

MAC

AMAZING

JANUARY

35¢

STORIES

**AUCTION
THIS
DAY
—
50
TERRAN
FEMALES**

**SUITABLE AS
WIVES - SLAVES
SWEETHEARTS
—
MARTIAN
IMPORTS
LTD.**



by Harry Harrison

Old is New Again

**October is
Alternate
History Month**

**To celebrate, we offer
this defining essay,
followed by an
alternate
Civil War tale.**



THERE IS SOMETHING NEW IN SCIENCE FICTION. Well... almost new. It has been around a long time, but only recently has it been recognized as a separate genre. This type of story is variously known as "Alternate Worlds," "Alternative History," "Parallel Worlds," and "Alternate History." All but one of those terms is doomed to wither and die. Since "Alternate History" is used as a category title by at least one major publisher, Del Rey Books, that name probably will prevail in the end.

The stories or novels that make up this category are accounts of Earth as it might have been, or will become, following some hypothetical alteration of history.

Rethinking the future by delving into the past has created a relatively new kind of fiction. Some interesting early examples date back as far as 1907, when G. M. Trevelyan wrote the essay "If Napoleon Had Won the Battle of Waterloo." Even then (as seems to be the case nowadays in the genre) the emphasis was on military change—the idea that altering the outcome of battles and wars would cause major upsets in society as a whole. For a number of years at the start of this century, speculations of this type were written as essays rather than full-fledged pieces of fiction. The classic collection of alternate-history essays, "If, or History Rewritten," was edited by J. C. Squire and published in 1931. Among the contributors were such illustrious thinkers as Winston Churchill, G. K. Chesterton, and Hilaire Belloc.

Without a doubt the modern school of military doom-sayers was founded by George Chesney with his masterful and seminal "The Battle of Dorking" (1871). For the first time ever, a professional military man (Chesney was a lieutenant colonel) described a future war in which the invaders fought with novel weapons. This work was followed by many other writers prophesizing about war, and eventually the topic became an accepted sub-literary form.

Years passed. It was finally in science fiction that the alternate history (AH) concept as a venue for fiction found a home. Probably the first such story was Murray Leinster's "Sideways in Time" (1934). More and more AH stories were published after that, but it is only in the last decade that alternate history has been recognized as a form of literature in its own right.

Definitions are in order: True AH stories come in three disparate and simple forms. With great acumen I shall label them 1, 2, and 3.

1. The story set in the past. A change occurs, perhaps even a slight one, that will bring about a different future from the one we know. One example is my own *Stars and Stripes Forever*, in which Prince Albert dies a few weeks earlier than he did in the actual past—a fact that brings about monumental changes in history. This might be called the “butterfly’s wing” branch of this form, in which the smallest of changes to an event causes enormous consequences.

The other branch of this form holds the type of story in which an incredibly large event changes the course of history. A good early example is R. W. Clark’s *Queen Victoria’s Bomb*, about the discovery of the atomic bomb much earlier in time. For more recent work, see the *Worldwar* series by Harry Turtledove—here the Second World War is changed beyond recognition when aliens invade in the middle of it.

2. The story set in the past where a time traveler arrives to change the future. In this form, new ideas or objects are introduced in order to bring about a different, and hopefully better, future than the one we live in. L. Sprague de Camp’s *Lest Darkness Fall* (1941), in which the hero fights to prevent the Dark Ages, is the earliest and still best example of changes to be caused by new ideas. My own *A Rebel in Time* (1983) is an example of changes brought about by the insertion of a physical object.

A subcategory of this form might be called 2A—a story in which a time traveler goes back to change reality in order to create the world that we know. In my novel *The Technicolor Time Machine* (1967), a movie company goes into the past to make a film of the Vikings discovering Vinland—and in so doing, the company changes history so that the Vikings actually *did* discover Vinland. (Editor’s note: “Where Does a Circle Begin?”, the piece of fiction that starts on the following page, is also this type of story.)

3. The story of the present that we now live in having been altered by a change in the past. Examples of this form of AH are Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) and Robert Harris’s *Fatherland* (1995), both stories of what happened after the Germans won the Second World War. Also in this category is my own *A Transatlantic Tunnel, Hurrah!* (1972), which postulates the world of today that would result if the colonists had lost the American Revolution.

I AM PLEASANTLY SURPRISED to find that I have written novels in all of these categories. This is a discovery after the fact and was not intentional at the time I defined my terms. In fact, I have always been fascinated by alternate history and have written these novels simply because I found in them the ideas and plots that I would most enjoy writing.

What about the “parallel worlds” form of AH? Well, as I see it, this concept is a sort of wild card in alternate-history writing—it does not fit in with the other forms of AH,

since it is fantasy sugarcoated with science. It relies completely on the unsupported physical theory that countless universes, including our own, may be lying side by side. The postulate is made that at some specific time in the past there was a nodal point, an action or reaction of some kind, from which two or more possible futures could result. Each future produced a new timeline, a new parallel universe—and at each node of change that came later, two (or more) possible other universes were formed. All of these changed universes lie next to each other, unseeable and unreachable—unless we could find a way to go sideways in time, to penetrate these parallel universes and see how different they are from the one we know. This is actually a fantasy idea and not a science-fictional one—thus, “parallel worlds” stories are not genuine alternate history.

Strangely enough, H. G. Wells in his scientific romances established almost all of the science fiction themes that other writers would later explore—but not alternate history. He described invasion from Mars, modern technical warfare, time travel, future technology, and many more novel concepts, yet he never wrote an AH novel. The closest he came was with *A Modern Utopia* (1905) and *Men Like Gods* (1923). These are not AH, but rather descriptions of technically sophisticated and socialist societies of the future, with advice for the present-day reader on how to bring them about.

Alternate history stories have been around for a long time, but only as single stories set in the great body of general fiction. The recognition of alternate history as a separate form of fiction is a quite recent development. Now, coming on the heels of that recognition, the alternate history novel seems to be creating a separate niche of its own in general fiction. (*The Guns of the South*, Harry Turtledove’s 1992 novel about the Confederacy winning the Civil War, was a selection of the Science Fiction Book Club and also the Military Book Club.) This is a promising development for writers and readers, since it opens up endless new vistas of story ideas.

Writing alternate history is hard work, but most rewarding. I encourage new writers—and established ones—to consider alternate history and turn their attentions to this fascinating and still developing field. I look forward to reading what they write.

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about the author

Harry Harrison, author of *The Stainless Steel Rat* series, Nebula Award winner, and writer of forty novels and numerous short stories, has been hard to pin down. He’s lived “everywhere.” He writes hard science fiction adventure novels while at the same time spoofing the conventions—and politics—of that genre. He is deeply American, and deeply expatriate. He might spend the rest of his career writing bad-joke spin-offs from his earlier work, or he might compose his masterpiece. After forty years, there is still no knowing...

WHERE DOES *a* CIRCLE BEGIN?

Cause and effect, effect and cause—there are no ironclad rules in time travel.

BY JOHN G. HENRY

AFINE MIST fell from a gunmetal sky, adding a soggy undertone to the chill that ate into me from the surrounding air. Mud sucked at my boots as I eased along the fence, listening for sounds of human activity, especially the sloshing tramp of a sentry making rounds. I'd researched what a minié ball could do to human flesh and didn't want to gain any personal experience with humanity's current state of the art in maiming-and-killing technology.

Still, you gotta do what you gotta do. Portsmouth, Virginia, on 12 January 1862, certainly offered rotten weather and the

the frigate's hulk very interesting indeed. Why had Richmond ordered a Confederate shipyard to waste time on a burned-out ship? One more sailing vessel, more or less, couldn't make any real difference in the war. It was an anomaly, something that didn't fit with the history I knew, and that made it number one on the list of things to check out.

Of course, I could just jump several years ahead and see what had happened when to help the Confederates, but then I'd be fighting history instead of working with it. Momentum helps a lot. Besides, Interventions snowballed. A small Intervention



threat of deadly violence, but it also likely held information of great importance to me and my client. I'd jumped into Richmond, the capital of the American Confederacy, looking for clues to a possible Intervention, and the biggest clue I'd found here-and-now pointed to this spot. A former U.S. warship, a frigate to be precise, had been burned to the waterline at Portsmouth in 1861 when U.S. government troops pulled out one step ahead of the Confederates. The useless wreck had later been towed out and sunk in Hampton Roads after the Union retook the city. Which made the here-and-now work around

early on could produce major changes down the line, so that I'd waste effort fighting the big changes and still not identify or counter the original Intervention. The people I'd been hired to stop knew that as well as I did. So, here I was in 1862 getting rained on.

Despite its aged appearance, the fence around the shipyard felt pretty sturdy wherever I tried it. Bowing to the inevitable, I reached up and swung myself over, blessing the fact that barbed wire hadn't yet been invented. On the other side, the mud was even worse, a fact I confirmed by sinking into it up to my ankles

when I landed. An assortment of two-story brick buildings loomed in the mist, surrounded by the usual piles of shipyard junk. Ahead, the Elizabeth River rolled sluggishly toward its junction with the branch of the Chesapeake Bay known as Hampton Roads. On the other side of the Elizabeth, the buildings of Norfolk were invisible in the gray drizzle.

The dry docks were big ship-shaped holes lined with brick, set below the level of the river, protected from the water by huge gates. Given the nearly nonexistent status of the Confederate States Navy, it was hardly surprising that most of the holes were empty. One, though, had a separate fence around it, a fence obviously of newer vintage than that surrounding the shipyard as a whole. It also had lamps hung at more or less regular intervals and entirely too many sentries in gray cloaks pacing around, each huddled against the weather but obviously still alert for intruders.

"Jeannie, do you have a map of this place in 1862 on file?"

Nanoimplants are beautiful things. Help's never far away. My Personal Assistant considered the question for a long moment before replying on her internal link: *Sorry. That's not available.*

"Blast." In a history replete with lost and destroyed records, even close-at-hand help could be of limited use. Okay, so I'd have to do it the hard way. Picking the nearest brick building, I eased close, eyeballing the doors and windows for possible access and the presence of any more guards. Entry proved easy

wore heavy shoes. I heard the tramp of footsteps coming down the hall outside. I'd been carrying my muddy boots since entering the building, but they'd dripped some on the way down the hall, leaving a scattered but incriminating trail. If the sentry happened to be careless or tired, that wouldn't matter, but this one was neither. The steps halted near my door, then came on again, much softer and slower.

The door swung slightly open, prodded by a sharp steel point at the end of a long three-sided bayonet stuck on the business end of a .69 caliber Enfield rifle. Very crude weapons by my standards, but at close range, sophisticated technology isn't a requirement for deadliness. Eventually, a middle-aged guy in a gray uniform stuck his nose in the room, swinging his rifle barrel from side to side as he surveyed the office. Shrugging, he brought the barrel up to a ready position and walked out, closing the door carefully behind him.

I relaxed, lowering my arms from where they'd been poised to slam the door into the sentry if he'd tried to enter the room any farther. It's funny how often the old standing-behind-the-door trick works, but then maybe it wasn't old in the here-and-now. I took another long look at the papers in the office, sizing up the opposition, while the footfalls headed away. Once they'd faded out, I eased back through the door, aiming for the window I'd jimmied on the way in.

"Haaalt!" The accent was very broad, but the meaning was



by prying open a wooden-framed window. I prowled down the halls, checking offices for signs of construction information and keeping my eyes and ears peeled for roving sentries.

The fourth office I tried held the jackpot. Not plans as such, but a whole list of requisitioned materials. From that list, it was pretty obvious what the Confederates were doing to that burned-out ship. It was also obvious that I had my work cut out for me. My opponents were well along the way to achieving an effective Intervention that might swing events decisively in the South's favor.

Fortunately for the North and my client, Confederate guards

unmistakable. I fixed an expression meant to convey confusion and fear on my face, then turned slowly, hands and arms dangling loosely. The guy with the rifle stood there, looking determined. He'd been smarter than I'd expected, faking a walk-away and then watching for anybody to show up. "Who're you?"

"Me? One of the builders. I'm working on the ship."

His face worked as the words sunk in, then his expression lit up with a sudden realization. "Hey! You're a Yankee!"

"No. Not at all. I was born on Io."

"Huh?" While he was still digesting that, I threw my left

hand wide, drawing both his attention and the rifle barrel in that direction, then pointed my right hand and fired the stun charge implanted along the bottom of the index finger. The crystal hit him low on the torso, drawing a surprised jerk from him as he focused back on me. Then the chemical hit—his eyes rolled up, his knees collapsed, and the rest of his body went as limp as a Beta Cetian without an exoskeleton. I caught both falling man and falling weapon, not just because I needed the karma but because I didn't want any loud crashes drawing anybody else's attention.

The stun charge would keep him out for about a half hour, after which he'd look and feel like he was suffering from a severe hangover. Since the stun crystal didn't leave a noticeable entry wound, I hoped he'd have a hard time making anyone believe he'd been knocked out by an intruder instead of a bottle. I propped the guy up, weapon at his feet, and left him snoring away. "Sleep tight."

RICHMOND IN 1861 had that ugly ambiance that seems to afflict every capital of every warring political entity. The streets were packed with smiling generals in crisp, pretty uniforms who'd probably never gone anywhere near a battle, a few other generals with grim expressions and outfits battered by hard use who looked eager to get out of town again, hordes of hearty men in suits who flashed money and talked about war contracts, and lots and lots of kids in new, ill-fitting battle garb who gawked at the big city while passing through on their way to the ironic immortality that death in battle brings. Money, glory, and death walking hand in hand. I've never cared for it, but you couldn't do jumps without running into that kind of scenario, and if I wanted to keep tabs on what the Confederates were doing, I had to be where they made their big decisions, which meant Richmond.

I'd made a short jump Downtime so there'd be enough time to get my counter-Intervention going, but I wasn't sure yet what form it should take. Try to short-circuit the other Intervention before it happened, or whip up a counter-Intervention to stop it later? I could only afford a few more jumps on what my client had paid me, so I had to try to do things right the first time. For now I sat in a fancy restaurant with war-profiteer inflated prices, eating Smithfield ham while surrounded by Southern aristocrats all confidently predicting a short and victorious war. Funny how nobody ever predicts long and losing wars.

enough to earn him a degree and my lasting dislike. "What brings you here and now?"

He smiled back just as falsely. "I was about to ask you the same thing."

I shrugged. "Research. I wanted to check out the old Civil War battlefields."

"There aren't any old Civil War battlefields yet. Some are new, and the others haven't been made."

I scratched my head in mock puzzlement. "I wondered why so many locals were still running around in uniforms. I've got to talk to my assistant about her scheduling of my jumps. So, why are you here?"

Harry flashed another smile notable for its lack of sincerity. "Good old Mike. Always kidding." He leaned forward, smirking. "I'm a T.I. Working for a big outfit. I guess they could recognize real talent."

"Congratulations." It wasn't too hard to guess what kind of outfit would hire someone like Harry. Exactly the same sort of outfit working to ensure a Southern victory in the here-and-now.

Harry seated himself opposite me, playing idly with the heavy silver place setting before him. "Thanks. I hear you're a Temporal Interventionist, too, Mike."

"It's one of the few jobs history majors are suited for," I noted. "I've done a few Interventions."

"Yeah. I heard about that bit with the Wright brothers. How'd you swing that?"

I couldn't help smiling a trifle smugly. "Somebody wanted them to be the first to achieve powered heavier-than-air flight, but their craft was a touch too heavy. I slipped them some precipitation-hardened metal for their engine, just lighter enough than their state-of-the-art to do the trick. Somebody finally noticed the anachronism maybe a century later, but they just credited it to dumb luck."

Harry smiled back, also smug. "Maybe it was dumb luck, Mike. You don't seem to be too good at Interventions." He shook his head, trying to look sad this time. "You left a calling card up in 1862, Citizen. Sloppy." It wasn't too surprising that my use of the stun shot had been detected. That the word had made it farther Downtime, though, indicated Harry and his outfit were running multiple jumps to the same Downtimes. Apparently his client had money to burn. "You think we can't spot stun aftereffects?"

His insult stung a little despite my resolve to stay impassive.

"THE CLIENTS ARE ALWAYS RIGHT, MIKEY"

"Greetings, Citizen Holmes."

The anachronistic title brought me slowly around, staring poker-faced at a tall, slim, and familiar figure in a here-and-now expensive suit. I pretended to smile. "Harry Dawson. Small world." Harry came from a period about a century Uptime from my own, but we'd met when we were students and he came Downtime to study under one of my professors who would become famous in the intervening decades. Unfortunately, Harry's idea of studying was to suck up to a professor tighter than a lamprey to a shark, a method that worked just often

"We?" I asked with exaggerated interest. "Is that the royal 'we'? Have the locals anointed you emperor, Harry?"

He glared back, momentarily off balance. "No. I'm not working alone. My clients, unlike yours, could afford to hire an outfit with more than one T.I., Mikey."

I just grinned, letting the old taunting form of my name slide off my back. "Some people prefer quality to quantity, Harry."

Harry's grip on the big steak knife in his hand shifted, momentarily canting the point my way. "Look, Mikey, you already lost."

"Really? When did this happen?"

That smirk I remembered all too well lit his face again. "Several months from now. Hang around a while and keep reading the papers. You'll see it."

"I'm looking forward to it. Do you have any more wisdom to pass on?"

"Yes." Harry's smirk shifted into a snarl. "Get out of the here-and-now. You're playing out of your league."

I laughed, loudly enough to draw some disapproving stares from the Southern aristocrats in the vicinity. "I thought you said you already won, Harry. So why are you trying to threaten me?"

"Just trying to protect an old friend. You'd take my advice if you were smart."

"Thanks. Why is this so important, Harry? What's your client's stake in a victory by the Confederacy?"

"You think I'm unprofessional enough to tell you that?"

I shrugged as if the point were a small one. "Harry, I already know what your client wants, a victory by the South. I'm just curious why."

"What's it matter to you?"

"I'm a historian, remember?"

"Oh, yeah." Harry grinned nastily, as if recalling school days. "The client's a funny old guy, Mikey. He's dying, but he figures that's because he's got defective genes."

"That's nuts. Everybody dies."

"Yeah, but rich people figure they ought to be exempt. This guy thinks if his blood was pure, he'd live longer than a couple of centuries."

"Pure blood?" I had to dredge up memories of some antiquated prejudices before the connection made sense. "He thinks if his ancestry had been pure, what did they call it, Aryan or something, he'd be healthier?"

Harry grinned wider, enjoying the chance to mock his client. "He thinks he'd be a superman. So, if we make sure these Southerners win, that's a step on the way to keeping racial separation a reality for a while."

"Did you tell your client that during slavery there was more racial mingling than afterward for a long time?"

"The clients are always right, Mikey, especially when they're rich." Harry leaned back, using the knife to clean his fingernails. "So," he wondered in a too-casual voice, "what's your client's beef with my client?"

"My client hates slavery, Harry. It's a moral thing. You wouldn't

crats to focus on a visibly uncomfortable Harry. For an allegedly experienced T.I., he'd pulled a real amateur trick: boasting of a win. Granted, that win made things harder for me. Undoing something that's already happened is a lot harder than doing something new. If I was an amateur, I'd focus my effort on trying to stop Harry's outfit from getting the win instead of looking at the long game. Fortunately for my client, I wasn't an amateur.

"Jeannie, I need an inventor."

American? Operating during this Downtime segment?

"Yes. No. I don't care what nationality, as long as he or she lives in the current United States."

Jeannie hummed softly while she thought, then offered her results. *There are several possibilities. All are male, which is characteristic of this period.*

"Any of them specialize in maritime engineering?"

Yes. One. Name John Ericsson. Scientist and engineer. Produced a mix of minor inventions. Remembered primarily for first successful design of a screw propeller.

"I see. What exactly is a screw propeller?"

A relatively efficient means of propelling a waterborne craft via rotary motion.

"He sounds like our man. Do you have his current address?"

Jeannie thought about that. *Yes, Michael.*

"How about maritime engineering information? Things invented and built within the next half century of here-and-now?"

Yes, Michael. You brought the necessary data modules.

"Good. Now, where's this Ericsson live?"

New York City.

TECHNOLOGY LET ME jump thousands of years in the wink of an eye, but once in a here-and-now I was limited to the available forms of transport, which in this particular here-and-now tended to be both slow and uncomfortable. The fact that armies were arrayed for battle between me and my objective didn't simplify things any. Fortunately, the old United States was so big and so sparsely settled that slipping through the battle lines turned out to be a piece of cake. It still took time, though, and based on what I'd learned in Richmond and Portsmouth, I realized there wasn't too much time left to make sure Harry's win next year didn't last.

People who don't work as Temporal Interventionists have a real hard time grasping the process, or maybe only people who can think in the right way become T.I.s. I recalled the baffled

ESPECIALLY WHEN THEY'RE RICH."

understand."

Harry lost his smile, sitting up straight and tilting the knife back toward me. "Too bad, because slavery's gonna be around a while longer, like it or not. Get out of the here-and-now."

"And if I don't?"

"There's a war going on, Mikey. People can get hurt."

"I'll remember that. I'll also make sure my Personal Assistant forwards that threat back Uptime, so that if anything happens to me, the authorities will know whom to question about it. Have a nice day, Citizen." I walked out, leaving the still-annoyed aristocrats

look on my current client's face as I'd tried to explain things. "But if we change the past, won't that change the present?"

"The present has already been changed," I explained patiently. "Before time travel became practical, people worried that it violated causality, because they thought causality had to be linear through time. That's not necessarily the case, of course. That's why even in pre-time travel eras the physics equations indicated that time travel was possible."

"Because causality is circular through time, right?" the client recalled.

"Exactly. It's a loop. We do something Uptime that causes something to happen Downtime that creates the conditions for us to do the same something Uptime."

"Then you already know how you'll achieve what I want. It's in the history files."

"No, I don't, and no, it isn't." This was where clients' eyes always glazed over. "I haven't done it yet."

"But if you're starting the process now..."

"The process doesn't start anywhere. It's a loop, Citizen. Where does a circle begin? Yes, it's already happened, but it hasn't happened yet. Sort of like Schrödinger's Cat on a really big scale. We live in a world that's the end result of countless Interventions, but we aren't aware of the Interventions until they've closed their loops. That's how time works."

"I don't understand," the client said helplessly.

"I know. That's why you're hiring me."

CITIES NEVER CHANGED in some respects. They were always crowded. In Downtime, they also always stank. Nonetheless, Ericsson had an open window. One of the advantages of Downtime is that break-ins are a lot easier before air conditioning becomes common. I used an aerosol to painlessly inject my sleeping subject with a carefully configured cocktail of designer drugs, waited until they'd had time to take effect, then hauled him into a nearby chair and sat opposite him. Ericsson stared back, drugged into a half-hallucinatory state of receptiveness that would pass easily as an inspired dream come the morning. The technique worked for "inspiring" lots of things, even poetry, in unsuspecting Downtimers.

"Hi. I'm your subconscious." I hauled out some drawings I'd been working on during the trip with Jeannie guiding my hand, displaying various inventions appropriate to current technology, explaining how they worked, and implanting a sense of urgency as I did so. Ericsson soaked it all up, mustering a few smiles that showed the goofy delight an engineer feels when he sees a really neat machine. "You've got to put a lot of this together to build a new kind of ship," I finished. "You'll be famous. You'll do a great service for your adopted country." He nodded back, the gesture sort of wobbly from the drugs, then subsided back into receptiveness. I took him back to bed, settled him in, injected a second dose to counteract the first set of drugs so Ericsson wouldn't accept any unwanted inspirations

I'd shown him. I stared at the result, skeptical despite myself. "Will this thing float?"

Jeannie ran a quick analysis. *Yes, Michael.*

"Will it work? I didn't expect Ericsson to toss everything I showed him into one plan."

It appears workable, given the current state of technology.

"Okay. Let's go make sure it gets built."

TEMPORAL INTERVENTIONISTS specifically and historians in general know that any technological innovation faces two basic obstacles. The first is whether or not it's feasible given the current state of the art. The second is getting establishments wedded to older technologies to accept the new concept. I knew Ericsson's design would pass muster on the first count, but for the second I was going up against the institutional inertia of one of the most conservative mind-sets in human experience, that of naval officers. Not that I entirely blamed them for that conservatism. If some land invention doesn't work, you just walk away. If a ship design is bad, you get to practice inhaling water.

While waiting to check on Ericsson I'd pondered the problem, finally concluding no here-and-now admiral busy fighting a war would ever voluntarily agree to build a new kind of ship, and even if I convinced one by induced dreaming, the rest of the establishment would negate his efforts. That meant I had to convince someone who couldn't be overruled.

Washington, D.C., had the same wartime look Richmond had, only more so, since the North was bigger and richer. More generals, more kids in uniform, more money. Abraham Lincoln wasn't hard to spot, being both taller and homelier than most of his fellow Downtimers. The hard part turned out to be getting close enough to him to pass a message. I'd figured security for a public figure would be pretty minimal in this period, but I hadn't taken into account the war and the fears for his safety it would generate. Nor could I fault that attitude, with Harry and his friends lurking about.

I hung around the President for several long frustrating days and nights without seeing any chance to get his ear in a waking or dreaming state. From what I'd seen of the here-and-now White House, I could cool my heels for months waiting for an appointment, and I couldn't afford to waste that much time. Lincoln had to hear from me before he heard Ericsson's proposal.

While strolling down Pennsylvania Avenue past all the brick

WHY ARE YOU IN TOWN? WHY ARE

from background noise or events before morning, then left as dawn was graying the sky.

I really wanted to get on to the next stage of my Intervention, but had to wait to ensure that Ericsson hadn't reacted to my dream-sequence by trying to start a new religion or something. The process isn't foolproof, but then nothing is. After staying in the city for several days and almost getting used to the smell, I made another midnight visit to Ericsson's place, this time just sedating him so I could search his house at leisure. Sure enough, the diagrams scattered around revealed he'd taken on board everything

and wood-frame buildings, dodging pedestrians, carriages, and piles of horse manure as I tried to come up with another angle, I noticed I was being followed. The two individuals trailing me weren't very good, which told me they were locals and not some of Harry's coworkers. That kind of tradecraft has come a long way in the intervening centuries. It seemed like a good idea to find out what they wanted, despite the physical risk. "Jeannie, I need an alley with a way out the back."

The maps from this period aren't very reliable, Michael. Too much temporary construction.

I took a moment to wish I'd been able to reload my finger stun charge. "That's okay. Do your best."

Two more blocks, hang a right, half a block down.

"Thanks." I followed Jeannie's directions—and found myself fronting a pile of garbage blocking a narrow lane. In a pinch, I could climb over it as long as I didn't think about what was under me. Turning, I saw my two friends standing at the entrance to the alley. One was big and wide, like a gorilla. He looked powerful but slow, so he'd be easy to outrun. The other reminded me of a ferret on two legs—thin, quick, and dangerous. They came halfway down the alley and stopped, facing me with bland expressions. "May I help you gentlemen?" I asked.

"Maybe," the ferret drawled. "You seem pretty interested in President Lincoln."

"He's the President."

"That's right," the ferret agreed, "and we want him to stay that way." A slim hand dipped into one pocket and surfaced with a shiny metal badge. "Pinkerton Protective Services."

"I see." *During the American Civil War*, Jeannie informed me, *Pinkerton acted as both the forerunner of the Secret Service and as military intelligence*. Here I'd been busting my gut to get the President's ear, and a direct line to him had just walked into my lap.

The gorilla leaned toward me, rubbing one fist into the other palm. "Just answer our questions. No funny stuff."

"Why are you in town?" the ferret demanded. "Why are you following the President?"

I licked my lips, trying to project nervous sincerity. "The truth is, there's something I wanted to tell the President. Something very important."

The gorilla snorted in derision, while the ferret looked skeptical. "Lots of people think they got important stuff to tell Mister Lincoln. You tell us, and we'll decide."

"Okay. But this really is important. I got a friend down in Virginia, you see . . ." So I spilled my guts about the scheme Harry's group had cooked up, leaving out the Temporal Intervention parts, of course.

As I talked, the gorilla furrowed his brow while he tried to think, but the ferret whipped out a notebook and a writing implement and started making manual notes like mad. When I finished, he fixed me with a searching stare. "This on the level?"

"Of course. Why would I lie to you?"

"You tell me."

"You must have people down in Norfolk. Check it out for

It didn't seem like a good idea to announce I had to return to Richmond for my next jump. "Actually, I have business up north."

"Good. Since you seem unfamiliar with the city, we'll walk you to the train station."

"I hate to put you to all that trouble," I said. Not that I minded being run out of town, but I didn't want these locals watching where I went.

"No trouble at all," the ferret assured me. I shrugged and walked out beside him; the gorilla followed with a disappointed look on his face. At the station, the ferret offered me his pencil so I could pretend to write down some schedules; then I bought a ticket to New York City and palmed the pencil as a bit of petty revenge. As far as I could tell, no other tails followed me onto the train, but just in case I used a doubleback in Baltimore before heading south.

I'd primed a Northern inventor to build something and the Northern President to want that same thing despite any protests. Now it was just a matter of waiting for the fireworks and hoping I'd timed things right.

THE FIREWORKS WERE impressive. I had to give Harry and his pals credit. The ironclad ship concept they'd suggested to the Confederates had been simple and suited to current technology. No messy anachronisms this time. So here I was on 8 March 1862, back at Hampton Roads, watching the old frigate *Merrimack*, reborn as a humpbacked metal monster and rechristened *Virginia*, steaming grandly back to port after trashing a couple of wooden warships in the Union blockade fleet. This, as it happened, was the "win" Harry had boasted to me about. Break the Union blockade, and you opened the door to European recognition of the Confederacy and a steady supply of weapons.

Harry had been partly right to announce victory, but only partly. Just because his people had managed a win for the South on March 8 didn't mean they'd continue the winning streak the next day, not if the counterpunch I'd set in motion materialized on schedule. Which it should, since I'd primed the North to keep track of the work on the *Merrimack*. I hadn't been able to follow events up north since coming south, but Ericsson's ship ought to be on its way here now.

"Well, well. Look what the cat drug in."

I turned at the familiar voice, seeing Harry two paces behind

YOU FOLLOWING THE PRESIDENT?"

yourselves." Once these Pinkertons confirmed my story and handed it to Lincoln, he'd be very receptive to the proposal Ericsson would be making in the near future. Receptive enough to overrule any objections from the shipbuilding establishment. As someone once suggested, letting people act in their own best interests was the best way to get results.

The notebook flipped shut and slid into a pocket as the ferret nodded. "We'll check on it. Thanks. If this is true, President Lincoln will hear about it." He stood aside, gesturing with a jog of his head out the alley. "Where are you going now?"

me smiling as smug as you please. "Harry Dawson. Fancy finding you here-and-now."

"Long time no see, Citizen."

"Not long enough, Citizen." We were playing a delicate mental ballet, each trying to determine when we'd last seen the other. Had Harry already threatened me in Richmond months before, or would he go there after this meeting? I was on my third jump, but he might be on his first or his fifth. I tried playing to his not inconsiderable ego. "Is this your doing?"

His smile widened so far I could examine his dental work.

"That's right, Citizen. I hope you weren't hired by somebody who didn't want it to happen, because if you were, they wasted their money."

Bingo. Here-and-now he wasn't sure who'd hired me, which meant this meeting came before the one in Richmond back in 1861. "I never discuss my clients' business in public. It's unprofessional."

"So is losing, and I bet you just lost. Are you going home now?"

"No. I think I'll hang around. I'm starting to like this place."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Don't get any ideas. We're watching you."

I started to reprise my last year's remark about him being an emperor, remembered he hadn't heard it yet, and decided to hold it so it'd have full impact when I slung it at him earlier. "You do that, Harry. See you around."

I left him standing there, looking triumphant, and headed back into Norfolk, looking for a place to spend the night. The next few days might or might not be a foregone conclusion, so I needed to confirm firsthand that I'd done what my client wanted. The sun set in a blaze of glory, filtered by the smoke from gunpowder discharges and burning ships, while I walked, wondering how well lighted the streets here were at night.

The answer was not very well, not that it mattered for long. While walking through a particularly dark patch on the street, I heard a stealthy sound behind me, followed an instant later by the impact of a stun charge punching into my back. After that, it really got dark.

I awoke with an aching head and a queasy stomach. The reason for the painful head was obvious, and once I pried open my eyes so was the reason for the upset stomach. I lay in the bottom of some kind of small wooden watercraft, bobbing erratically in the choppy waters. Except for the moving water, everything else was silent and still in that curious way things always get between midnight and dawn. My first attempt to move revealed that my hands were bound together at the wrists behind me.

"Good morning, Citizen," a now very familiar voice snarled.

"Hi, Harry."

He knelt in the bottom of the boat, his angry face centimeters from mine. "Real good trick you're going to pull, Citizen. But not good enough. Maybe you stopped us tomorrow, but it won't happen that way."

ing a cylindrical shape that glinted metallically in the moonlight.

A minitorpedo. Not the things they called torpedoes here-and-now, which were just tethered mines, but a real self-propelled fish as long as my leg and equipped with a high-explosive warhead. Four holes in the top and sides of the back marked the outlets for the pressure-jet impellers. No primitive screw propellers for Harry's guys. Technology that flashy and anachronistic was risky as all get-out, not even counting the cost of bringing it on a jump, which meant my opponents were desperate. That was good. Unfortunately, I was tied up in their boat, and the ugly little weapon they'd brought Downtime had a very good chance of doing its job, all of which was bad.

"You can't be serious," I suggested. "What kind of Temporal Intervention footprints are you planning on leaving behind here?"

Harry's smile didn't waver. "None that matter. Your ship is sitting at anchor nearby. This jewel will cruise under its keel and blow a hole in the bottom. It won't sail out to fight tomorrow. End of Michael Holmes's little toy, and none of the locals will ever guess what really happened. For that matter, maybe the end of Michael Holmes, period. Like I told you earlier, Mikey, there's a war on, and people get hurt all the time."

"That's not very nice, Harry." A glimmer of an idea came to me, but if I was going to execute it, I needed a good bit of distraction. Well, there was Harry leaning over me, and my feet were free. . . .

The sole of my foot caught him in the solar plexus. Harry went back and over with a tremendous splash. While his two pals dropped their oars and lunged to get him, I brought my knees up and my hands forward until they cleared my feet, then dug frantically in my coat pocket, fumbling with my bound hands to seize and pull out the ancient writing implement I'd lifted off the Pinkerton ferret. I rolled toward the torpedo as my hands surfaced with the pencil, and jammed it as hard as I could into the right-hand impeller hole. It stuck solid halfway in, so I swung my clenched hands viciously, breaking off the protruding portion. By the time Harry, dripping wet and mad as a French Revolutionary circa 1800, saw me again I was lying back in place, smiling apologetically. "How's the water, Citizen?"

His fist came partway back, then lowered slowly. "You'll find out," he whispered. "Only nobody will pull you back in the boat. Understand? But first, I want you awake and aware while

"HISTORIANS LABELED IT A REMARKABLE

I took a moment to sort the jump-tangled tenses through my aching brain. Apparently, this Harry had come from an even later jump, after tomorrow's events had been decided. "Criminy, Harry. How many jumps can your client afford?"

"Enough," he spat back.

"Well, you should lay off them. They're making you real anti-social."

Instead of getting madder, Harry just smiled. "Talk all you want. Your ace is about to get trumped." With a dramatic flourish he whipped a piece of canvas off an object lying near me, reveal-

your Intervention gets ruined." I lay there as the boat bobbed its way across the water for an interminable period, occupying myself by slowly working at the ropes binding my hands. Based on the period, and the way they felt against my skin, those ropes should be natural fiber, which meant they were a lot stiffer than a synthetic and were also slightly slick. Also rough. It hurt like hell, but one of my hands slowly began to work through its binding. I hadn't quite finished when Harry finally gestured to his friends to stop rowing and pointed gleefully off to the side. "There. You can't miss it. And neither will the tor-

pedo." With the help of both buddies, he hoisted the weapon over the side.

I needed to distract them in order to make sure they didn't look too closely at the weapon and see my sabotage. "How's that torpedo work, Harry? Some sort of homing device?"

Harry shook his head scornfully. "Too unreliable after a jump, Citizen, as you should know. No, it's a simple straight-runner with an internal gyro to keep it fixed on course." He leaned over the side of the boat, fumbling with something, then straightened. "There it goes. Say good-bye to your plan, Mikey."

"Good-bye, Harry." Something about my voice must have alerted him, because Harry looked at me with a very worried expression for about five seconds. That's how long it took for the torpedo, unable to hold a straight course with the impeller on one side completely blocked, to circle back around and pass under our boat. There was a muffled whump as the center of the rowboat flew upward and into pieces, followed by a geyser of water. Harry and his pals got tossed in one direction with their end of the boat while I went in another.

The water was cold as Europa and murky with stuff I didn't care to think about. No wonder Harry had been so mad when I dunked him. I lunged up, gasping for air, before my period clothing absorbed water like a sponge and dragged me back under. I had time to wonder if my improvised plan had a serious flaw, then flexed with all my strength against my bonds. Thanks to a little extra lubrication from the water, the hand I'd been working on jerked free, leaving a significant quantity of skin behind. Stroking to the surface again, I got another breath before my clothes pulled me down once more; then I pulled off my coat before fighting my way up a third time. Grabbing a largish piece of rowboat as it drifted by, I rested on the impromptu float, watching as my hand dribbled blood into the frigid water. "Jean-nie, did sharks inhabit these waters in this here-and-now?"

Affirmative. I do not have records giving precise hunting areas, however.

"That's okay. Thanks." I ripped my shirt off despite the cold, wrapped it around my hand, then started paddling away from the yells and curses of Harry and his pals. I wondered what story they'd tell if a Union picket boat hauled them aboard.

I mostly drifted until daylight, which fortunately wasn't long in coming, wishing this little event had been timed for a much warmer part of the year. Uptime, mental training included a lot of ways to activate ancient methods of coping with severe tem-

"So," I finished explaining, "the disappointed locals took me back to Norfolk with them, and I headed for Richmond to get my jump gear and come back Uptime. With the *Merrimack* nullified, the Union took Norfolk a couple of months later."

"And no one thought it amazing that both North and South decided to produce these ironclads at the exact same time?" my client asked.

I couldn't help smiling. "Downtime historians labeled it a remarkable coincidence." Coincidence explains everything and nothing, which made it convenient for Temporal Interventions like the Wright brothers' engine and Ericsson's ironclad.

"That's wonderful. Is there any chance this torpedo the other T.I.s used will be found and create temporal problems?"

"No. The bottom there is soft mud, so any pieces left after it exploded sank right out of sight."

The client shook her head, plainly bewildered. "But now history records this battle of ironclad ships. It couldn't have before. Why didn't your changing history change our present as well?"

"Because I didn't change the present. It's based on the North winning the American Civil War. Fine. The North won. Some details changed, that's all."

"But . . . but . . . someone once said God is in the details."

"They did? They were wrong. God doesn't care about details. Neither does the universe. Ask a quantum physicist. Historians used to care about details, which is why all the inconsistencies in the historical record drove them crazy."

"I still don't understand," the client said. "If our present is based on large events that are inevitable, such as the North winning the American Civil War, why do some people try to change those large events?"

I grinned reassuringly. "Because they're people, because they can try, and because people do things regardless of whether they're right or smart. As to inevitability, we don't know that. You hired me, I stopped the other guys."

"But what if I hadn't hired you and no one had stopped them? Wouldn't our present still remain the same, if you're right? Wouldn't someone else have ensured that the North still won?"

"I don't know. Is that a risk you'd care to take?" The client stared, then nodded and left. I leaned back for a while, remembering people and places long gone to dust, then started reviewing a file on Victorian England. Something told me I might need that information someday. 🕒

COINCIDENCE

peratures, but the ability to survive didn't make the cold any more pleasant. Eventually, a sailboat full of locals out to see the *Merrimack* aka *Virginia* in action again came by and picked me up. Wrapped in a blanket and fortified with their bourbon, I watched Ericsson's ship (which he'd christened the *Monitor*), screw propeller, rotating gun turret, forced ventilation and all, steam out to meet the Confederate vessel.

I and my boatmates spent the rest of the day contemplating the two ironclads bouncing solid shot off each other, until the *Merrimack* slunk home, stymied.



about the author

After retiring from a career in the U.S. Navy (which included a few months at the same Portsmouth Naval Shipyard where the former USS Merrimack was converted into the CSA

Virginia), John G. Hemry decided to try another long-hours, low-wage career—writing. He recently sold a three-volume book series to Berkley. The first novel in that series (Stark's War) is scheduled to be published in April 2000. His short fiction has also appeared in Analog and Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine.

John lives in Maryland with his wife, Sharrill (who, he says, is too good for him), and three great kids who keep him busy between attempts to write.



*A column designed to acquaint the ordinary person with Science
and other stuff that's really hard to understand.*

ASK DR. SCIENCE™

March 1999 *T. F. of Wahoo,
Nebraska, asks:*

Dr. Science, what do you know about current efforts to attain zero gravity?

Dear T. F.: A lot more than you do, pal. Seriously, though, a great deal of work is being done in this field. One area of research centers on reducing the effects of gravity through the superconductive process. When a small ceramic disk is subjected to a magnetic field in a liquid nitrogen-chilled atmosphere, the disk spins rapidly, and "floats," suspended in the air. Pretty slick, huh?

It should be noted, however, that scientists are a long, long way from creating

a practical antigravity device. Such an invention, of course, would literally change the world. Skyscrapers could be as high as you wanted them to be. You wouldn't get a hernia shoving the couch around the room. We would all drive antigravity cars, whipping along at great speed, a few inches above the road. Which is something my brother-in-law, Brock Hackmeyer, does without any help at all.

The only thing wrong with all this is that superconducting only works at about 390 degrees below zero. You want to beat

gravity, fine, you'd better bundle up. I'm not talking a sweater, I'm talking a big, big coat. A coat and a scarf and some kind of hat. You want to get a hat that comes over the ears. You don't wrap up, a lot of stuff is going to fall off. Scientists could learn a whole lot if they lived in Minnesota for a while.

September 1976 *R. B. of
Fukushima, Japan, would like
the answer to this question:*

Dr. Science, if you could have dinner with five great scientists of the past, which five would you choose?

Dear R. B.: Every month, some idiot comes up with this one. No offense, but you're clearly an idiot, too. Have you ever had dinner with a bunch of scientists? If you had,

you wouldn't be asking this question. Scientists chew with their mouths open. They spill a lot of food on their ties. Very few know how to use a fork. Half of them won't show up, they'll forget where to go. Those that do show won't pick up the check.

Are you nuts, R. B.? If Dr. Science is buying someone dinner, she doesn't look like a nutty old guy in a lab coat. You can lay money on that.

April 1997 *T. E. of Hokitika,
New Zealand asks:*

Dr. Science, I've heard about a new computer device that lets you "feel" objects on a computer screen. Can you tell me more about this?

Dear T. E.: Sure, I've heard of it. Who hasn't? What this thing is, is a joystick and a bunch of magnets. When you use it, you imagine you can actually feel whatever's on the screen—sharp, hard, soft, whatever—just about anything, or so I understand.

A great idea. And, hey—we *know* the computer industry won't think of a lot of kinky ways to *abuse* this invention, right?

Yeah, right. . . .

January 1995 *G. J. of
Chinook, Montana, asks:*

Dr. Science, I'm familiar with the V-chip, which allows parents to block out any TV programs they don't wish their children to see. Have there been any new scientific advances in this field?



Dear G. J.: Funny you should ask. There *is* a new development, one that's a long time coming, if you ask me.

Besides the G, PG, PG-13, R, etc., ratings, there are now settings children can impose upon their *parents*. Hey, is this a good idea or what? A couple of examples...

NKCMOAK: No Karen Carpenter music of any kind.

NSWLDOC: No shows with lawyers, doctors, or cops.

NSEETEGSF: No sports events except the European Girls' Soccer Finals.

NSWSO13—ELDWL13: No shows with stars over thirteen—except Leonardo DiCaprio, who *looks* thirteen.

NDCG: No Discovery Channel gnus.

NNP: No news period.

February 1997 *L. O. of Kewaskum, Wisconsin, would like an answer to this question:*

Dear Dr. Science: I've heard that scientists have discovered a new volcano in California. Is this just a rumor, or what?

Dear L. O.: Unfortunately, I'm afraid it's not a rumor, it's true. While studying the famous Triple Mendocino Junction, an area where crystal plates come together in California, scientists found a "hot spot" a dozen miles down. There's a big pool of magma down there, boiling and bubbling away. Sometime in the next 400,000 years, this thing could thrust up through the earth, and become a *really* major volcano.

Real estate developers, who know Californians are genetically inclined to live in disaster areas of any sort, are already clambering for lots above the site. Two planned communities, Lava Hills and Trembling Heights, are already sold out. This discovery has encouraged home

builders across the country to take another look at dangerous areas in their states, too.

May 1943 *L. C. of Minnedosa, Manitoba, would like an answer to this question:*

Dr. Science, I understand that a piece of rare, fossilized dinosaur flesh has been found that indicates some of these creatures had extremely rough, wartlike protrusions on their skin. I'd like to hear more about this.

Dear L. C.: *Why?*

Okay, no problem. You're partially correct. At first, they thought these disgusting, swollen, inflamed nodules were natural characteristics. Later studies showed that the dinosaur in question was quite young, and its skin condition was simply prehistoric acne. Dr. Science has a picture of himself just before he left for the high school prom. This picture shows why cheerleader Mary Jo LaPlace went with quarterback Vince Spacker instead of me.

Hey, I hope you have a bunch of kids now, Mary Jo, and they all have zits.

October 1965 *R. I. of Zwettl, Austria, asks:*

Dr. Science: Computers, cellular phones, and other electronic devices are getting smaller and smaller. As these instruments continue to shrink in size, it seems to me they'll become more and more difficult to use. Do you have an answer to this problem?

Dear R. I.: No, I don't, but somebody does. I'm breaking a confidence here, but what do I care? For some time now, researchers have been cloning very tiny hands in the laboratory. By the year 2012, a company called Ti-Nee Hands, Inc. will market hands less than an inch long,

hands perfectly suited to small keyboards and other such devices. A subsidiary firm, Ti-Nee Heds, Inc., will introduce very small heads, which can easily use miniature cell phones.

The only other answer to this problem is to stop making everything so small right now. Hey, tell Bill Gates, not me.

April 1984 *B. C. of Ossipee, New Hampshire, asks:*

Dr. Science, is it true that ATM machines will soon identify us by scanning the irises of our eyes?

Dear B. C.: Yes. This development will make it virtually impossible for thieves to steal money from an ATM. As soon as these units are installed, only trusted employees of the bank will be able to pilfer your account.

January 1997 *O. O. of Brig, Switzerland, would like an answer to this question:*

Dr. Science, have you heard of the new computer games that let you play God, and create your own worlds?

Dear O. O.: (Come on, no one has initials O. O.) Yes, I have heard of these games. I have also heard that only three players so far have been able to get beyond the first two years of creation without screwing up the entire universe.

September 1992 *T. F. of Phitsanulok, Thailand, would like an answer to this question:*

Dr. Science, I've been reading a great deal about NASA's interest in finding ice on other planets. Can you give me some more information on this?

Dear T. F.: Yes, I certainly can. You go anywhere a

bunch of Science guys hang out, like a convention out of town, you're going to hear a lot about ice. Recent studies show there might be ice below the surface of

Mars. And many experts believe there may be as much as 600 billion tons of ice at the lunar poles. The outer planets are also promising. Probes we've sent throughout the solar system tell us Europa, Callisto, and Ganymede, three of Jupiter's moons, may have icy surface layers several miles thick.

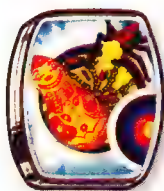
This sort of information is very important to scientists, T. F. I've been to a lot of Science meetings, and I can tell you for sure, when these dudes get away from the lab, they like to relax and have a good time. If you think these rummies are going to blast off for some little hunk of rock that doesn't have *ice*—forget it, pal.

June 1992 *V. L. of Bird City, Kansas, asks:*

Dr. Science, I read somewhere that you receive some questions that are simply too stupid to answer. Is this true? ☹

All questions appearing in ASK DR. SCIENCE have been adapted from questions sent in by readers to AMAZING Stories over the years, or have been sent to Dr. Science by bill collectors and other mean-spirited persons.

We welcome your questions for this column. But please do not address your questions to Dr. Science himself. Dr. Science knows better than to open his own mail. Address your questions to Neal Barrett, Jr., Dr. Science's friend, at AMAZING Stories, P.O. Box 707, Renton WA 98057-0707. Mr. Barrett will see to it that your questions are slipped under Dr. Science's door.



To Boldly Game

The History of Playing Star Trek

STAR TREK OPENED WITH A GAME OF CHESS. SORT OF.

The second *Trek* pilot, "Where No Man Has Gone Before," was actually the second episode to air. In *Trek* chronology, however, it's the first televised adventure for Captain Kirk and most of his crew (you can tell by the weird uniform collars and Spock's rougher-looking makeup). This episode opens with Kirk and Spock competing in an odd three-dimensional version of chess. Unintentionally or not, with this simple scene, the creators of *Star Trek* linked the U.S.S.

Enterprise to the "real world" with the act of gaming. True, the game looked odd, but it was recognizable as chess, one of the oldest games in existence. Kirk and crew weren't just heroic space adventurers, they were also real, competitive people. All that from a simple game of chess.

Star Trek and gaming have gone hand in hand ever since, and the games have become much more complicated than good ol' 3-D chess. If you're reading this, you can probably name one or two *Trek*-based games off the top of your head, such as the *Star Trek Customizable Card Game* or one of the many PC games on the market, like *Starfleet Academy*. Ever since the first voyage of the *Enterprise*, fans have been playing in the universe of *Star Trek*.

On Board the Enterprise

The Ideal Company produced the first game based on *Star Trek* in 1966, the year the show debuted. Called simply *The Star Trek Game* in a box adorned with a startled-looking Spock and a blue-clad Uhura, Ideal's game tapped into a market familiar with the exploits of the real-life

Mercury astronauts with the slogan, "An adventurous game that orbits the earth and the planets beyond!" This one's harder to find than a stick of deodorant



at a Renaissance faire (kidding, kidding, put down that side of mutton).

After NBC's second cancellation order finally killed the original run in 1969, *Star Trek* enjoyed a brief second chance at life in the form of an early-seventies animated series. All the main actors returned to do voices for their animated doppelgangers, and several new alien crew members appeared. Hasbro cashed in on this brief resurgence with another *Star Trek Game*. This one was subtitled "Action & Adventure in Outer Space" and featured animated-style artwork, not images from the original show. Players moved their ships around the board at impulse or warp speed, determined by a spin of the wheel.

Although in 1975 a British company called Palitoy also produced an ill-fated *Star Trek Game*, Milton Bradley offered the next *Trek* board game of note. The *Star Trek Game* released in 1979 was based on the then brand-new film *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, although the mission-solving aspect of game play hearkened back to the original series. Players moved little plastic *Enterprises* all over a big, sectional board, solving missions determined by a deck of cards. After solving a certain number of missions, you won. No combat, just peaceful mission solving—and lots of time spent staring out the window.

Trek-based board games were hard to come by for several years. Then, in 1992, BMI released the *Star Trek: The Final Frontier Game*. This one was distinguished by nice, glossy production values, decent game play, and, most importantly, by being the first *Star Trek* game not called "the *Star Trek Game*."

In 1993, a company called Cardinal produced the first board game set in the twenty-fourth century. The box of *Star Trek: The Next Generation—Game of the Galaxies* bills it as "a strategy game that brings the cosmic excitement of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* into your own home." In this game, you play an officer on the *Enterprise-D*, and you help the series primaries make command decisions. The name seems a little odd (there's more or less only one galaxy in *Star Trek*—ours), and the cards that come with the game look like props from Starbuck's favorite card game on *Battlestar Galactica*.

The same year, an upstart Virginia company called Decipher, Inc. produced its first game under the *Star Trek: The Next Generation*

◀ **TO BOLDLY GO.** *Star Trek: The Adventure Game* by West End Games blithely informed players that the easiest way to learn the rules was to have someone else teach them to you.

license. This *Interactive VCR Board Game* was subtitled "A Klingon Challenge." The "VCR" portion of the game starred Robert O'Reilly, the large-eyed gentleman who portrayed the late Chancellor Gowron. This time he's not Gowron—you can tell because his forehead bumps are different—he's just a rogue Klingon who has effortlessly commandeered the *Enterprise*. The players sit in the living room and represent crew members who were inadvertently stuck on board during the caper and now have to liberate the ship before the on-screen timer counts down to zero. The Klingon amusingly addresses players with commands like, "You! The one who is looking out the window now! Experience *Bij!*" The game was innovative, but ultimately too specialized to succeed; the video element was definitely the most interesting part. Decipher also produced a *Star Trek: The Next Generation* version of the live-action game *How to Host a Murder*.

Other titles fall into the board game category but can best be considered merely *Star Trek* versions of popular game types. Classic, Inc. offered yet another *Star Trek: The Game* in 1992, in which players pit their *Star Trek* know-how against that of their friends. More complex was Western Publishing's *Star Trek* edition of the *Golden Trivia Game*. You could get the whole game in one box, or if you were already a *Golden Trivia* player (and really, who wasn't?) you could just pick up the *Star Trek* question cards. And, of course, Parker Brothers produced a *Star Trek: The Next Generation* version of *Monopoly* in 1997.

Unfortunately, none of these games are currently being produced. However, the secondary market for *Star Trek* collectibles continues to thrive. If you can't find a game at a convention, trade show, or local hobby shop, you might want to try Internet auction sites like <www.ebay.com>, <www.amazon.com>, or <www.auctionuniverse.com>.

Everyone's a Captain Kirk

Roleplaying gamers are some of the most hard-core fans out there, and *Star Trek* and roleplaying have been an item since the early 1980s. That's when FASA Corp. released the *Star Trek: The Role Playing Game*, which allowed players to act out the roles of Starfleet characters in story plots hatched around the dining room table. The now-defunct game was set almost entirely in the twenty-third century. Prepackaged adventure plots, also called "modules," were set in both the time period of the films and that of the original series; it seems every two-bit

Star Trek plot idea became a module, spawning dozens of adventures such as *The Orion Ruse*, *Where Has All the Glory Gone?*, and *Return to Axanar*.

Task Force Games's *Star Fleet Battles* is a tactical counter to FASA's more traditional character-based game. *Star Fleet Battles* offered gamers the opportunity to wage realistic tactical combat, commanding starship fleets from any number of races including the standard Feds, Romulans, and Klingons. Also available were aliens that appeared in the original

show, like the Gorns and Tholians, along with the Kzintis, the Lyrans, the Hydrans, the Orions, the Andromedans, and the "Interstellar Concordium."

The game takes place in its own unofficial and unauthorized "Star Fleet Universe," which veers off from the official *Star Trek* timeline right before the first picture (the game was created and developed during the *Star Trek* dark ages of the seventies). What it lacks in Cardassians, though, it makes up for in inventive game play and gripping naval-style

combat in a galaxy that has fallen into a state of war. Task Force also produced a more strategic empire-building game set in this universe called *Federation & Empire* as well as *Prime Directive*, sort of a paper first-person shooter that casts you as a member of an elite Federation hazard squad.

In 1985 West End Games, until recently makers of the *Star Wars Role Playing Game*, produced *Star Trek: The Adventure Game*, which debuted with the *Enterprise Encounter* adventure and also included a module based on *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*. But *Star Trek* roleplayers everywhere have a bright future now, thanks to the folks at Last Unicorn Games, who released the *Star Trek: The Next Generation Roleplaying Game* in 1998. Supplements cover the major alien races like Romulans and Vulcans, and a new jumping-in point appeared this summer with the *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine Roleplaying Game*. Look for *Star Trek: Voyager* and *The Original Series* roleplaying games coming soon.

Deal!

The sky's the limit when you combine *Star Trek* and cards, or so I once heard. Other than the cards included as game pieces in board and roleplaying games or regular playing cards with a picture of the *Enterprise* on the back, *Star Trek* cards pretty much

GameSpace

The Klingon amusingly addresses players with commands like, "You! The one who is looking out the window now! Experience Bij!"

◀ "YOU BROKE YOUR LITTLE SHIPS." *Star Fleet Battles* dates from the "Trek Dark Ages" of the mid-seventies, but it's still going strong.



▲ CHUTES AND TURBOLIFTS This 1974 Hasbro game actually had more moving parts than the animated series.

GameSpace

Some *Star Trek* games produced over the years simply defy classification. Photon Ball (you heard right), made by Lincoln Enterprises, was a variation on the ol' Styrofoam-sticking-to-a-cloth-board game. In this one, though, you got to throw balls at starships.

used to refer to bubble gum trading cards and the like. The advent of trading card games such as *MAGIC: THE GATHERING*® spurred the creation of the *Star Trek Customizable Card Game* from Decipher—the company that produced the ill-fated “Klingon Challenge” VCR game. The trading card game is still going strong, thanks to a renewed license that grants Decipher rights to create games based on *Deep Space Nine*, *Voyager*, *First Contact*, and even *Insurrection*. The next release, the combat-heavy *Blaze of Glory*, should be arriving in card and game shops as you read this.

Fleer/Skybox dabbled in the trading card game market with *Star Trek: The Card Game*, based on the original series. Players once more set out in the *Enterprise* to complete “episodes” to earn experience points—first one to twenty-five points wins. The game couldn’t compete against Decipher’s; the latter not only beat this one to press, but also boasted superior imaging and design. In a way, it couldn’t be helped—Fleer had only the original series to draw upon, and next to the Borg Queen, the Gorn looked pretty hokey. Still though, you can find these cards for sale at most card stores or comic conventions. (Some advice: Look for the “Shirtless Kirk” card, pictured above.)



Computer Core

Nothing goes together like gee—er, *Star Trek* fans and video games! The first *Star Trek* game to enter this arena, way back in 1982, was the *Star Trek:*

The Motion Picture game for the long-lost Vectrex system. Once there, *Star Trek* remained on consoles for years, with a *Star Trek 25th Anniversary Game* on the old Nintendo system, and *Future's Past* and *Echoes of the Past* (both with the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* crew) on the Sega system.

In the early 1980s Sega also produced *Star Trek: Strategic Operations Simulator*, a major arcade game (plus a Genesis home version). This

game drew its inspiration from the simulator scene that opens *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* and was quite well-received. Serious collectors ought to be able to find a copy online.

While *Star Trek* hasn’t seen much action on the console lately, next year should bring more computer games than ever. *Star Trek* computer games have a spotty history, but for every clunky *Deep*

Space Nine: Harbinger, there’s a zippy *Star Trek: The Next Generation—A Final Unity*. The new crop of games looks to be heading in the right direction.

Star Trek: Deep Space Nine gets another crack with Simon & Schuster’s *The Fallen*, an adventure game that deals with the dark side of the Prophets. The *Unreal* engine (and elements from *Unreal Tournament*) should make this a satisfying first-person action game. Meanwhile, this summer Microprose released *Birth of the Federation*, a galactic-sized empire-building simulation.

Activision has its hands full with three ambitious games. *Voyager: Elite Force* is a game built on the *Quake III* engine that lets you go on a Borg-hunting shooting spree on Captain Janeway’s ship. *Star Trek: Armada* is a stunningly visual real-time strategy game centered around titanic ship battles. Play as the Borg, Romulans, Klingons, or Feds. Finally, the third-person cinematic action game *Star Trek: Insurrection* (think “Trek-sident

Evil”) is a sequel of sorts to the most recent movie. You play a human raised by Vulcans who’s dispatched by Captain Picard to the peaceful Ba’ku planet, and the game mercifully requires no joystick. Of the three games, *Armada* looks sharpest, with a “motion picture” setting that lets you view the battles (played out on a tactical grid) as if they were the opening sequence of *First Contact*.

Interplay, maker of *Baldur’s Gate*, has three *Star Trek* games in the hopper, too. Interplay’s license covers the twenty-third century of the earlier films; thus you see Christopher Plummer reprising his *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* role as General Chang in *Klingon Academy*, a space combat sim that promises faster action than *Starfleet Academy*. *Star Trek: New Worlds* has a lot in common with *Battlezone*, although you won’t always be running the real-time strategy from a first-person view. Hardcore gamers, meanwhile, are drooling over *Starfleet Command*, which finally ports the tactical ship fighting of the venerable *Star Fleet Battles* over to the PC.

Take the release dates of these new electronic games with a grain of salt, as the cyber end of the game industry suffers from notorious schedule problems. Your best bet is to check each company’s website for a current release date.

Fizzbin

Some *Star Trek* games produced over the years simply defy classification, but one should keep an eye out for them at conventions and shows. The *Star Trek* regulation dartboard came out long before Bashir and O’Brien’s regular matches in



▲ THERE ARE ROMULANS, AND THERE ARE ROMULANS. Interplay’s *Starfleet Command* draws on the funky, divergent ship designs from *Star Fleet Battles*.

Quark's Bar. *Photon Balls* (you heard right), made by Lincoln Enterprises, is a variation on the ol' Styrofoam-sticking-to-a-cloth-board game. In this one, though, you get to throw balls at starships. In Five Rings Publishing's *Star Trek: The Next Generation Collectible Dice Game*, players use multisided dice to engage mighty Borg cubes, Romulan warbirds, and Klingon ships in glorious space combat. This one definitely requires only a little less imagination than the photon balls.

We've seen a few *Star Trek* pinball games, including one by Bally based on *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*. However, the one that reportedly still ranks among the top ten pinball games in the world is Williams's *Star Trek: The Next Generation Pinball*. The game featured custom speech from major characters like Picard, Riker, Data, and Q, original music from the series, and dot-matrix animation of ships and characters. And it's a damn fun pinball game, too.

The Franklin Mint produces a 3-D chess game (like the one Kirk and Spock play in "Where No Man Has Gone Before") with little gold and silver chess pieces. The Mint

also gave us a good old-fashioned 2-D chessboard with pieces cast to resemble Kirk and Khan, among others. Either game ultimately could run you nearly as much as some used cars (although you do get to pay in convenient monthly installments).

Just as *Star Trek* has permeated the gaming world, so have games always been a part of *Trek*. Whether it's playing poker with a Betazoid, a Klingon, and an android; baseball games in Quark's holosuite; or even "psychotropically addictive" Ktarian games that only Wesley Crusher can resist, games on *Star Trek* remind the audience members that they're watching real people, not cast-iron space adventurers with no time for fun. And, if they're good enough for Starfleet's best, what are you waiting for? ♣



about the author

Cory Herndon has been operating under the influence of the Ktarian game for nearly eight years now. It's only a matter of time before someone takes notice. Somehow, he manages to find time to be Industry Editor of *Duelist* magazine and to edit <duelistmagazine.com>.

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BUYERS' GUIDE

Birth of the Federation

Microprose, 2490 Mariner Square Loop, Alameda CA 94501
<www.microprose.com>
PC-based CD-ROM strategy game; price varies

The Fallen

Simon & Schuster Interactive, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10020
<www.simonandsays.com/cddomain/>
PC-based adventure game; price varies

Klingon Academy Star Trek: New Worlds Starfleet Command

Interplay Productions, 16815 Van Karman Ave., Irvine CA 92606
<www.interplay.com>
Klingon Academy: Game of epic Klingon battles; price varies
Star Trek: New Worlds: 3-D strategy action game; price varies
Starfleet Command: Strategic game of starship combat; price varies

Star Fleet Battles

Amarillo Design Bureau, P.O. Box 8759, Amarillo TX 79114
<www.starfleetgames.com>
Set includes 224-page Captain's Rulebook, 24" x 20" full-color playing map, 216 die-cut multicolor playing pieces, 64-page book, two six-sided dice, and 11" x 17" card with key tables; \$29.99

Star Trek Chess Games

The Franklin Mint, US Rte. 1, Franklin Center PA 19091
<no website>
The Original Series 3-D Chess Game: sterling silver and 24k gold-plated traditional chess pieces; \$195
The Original Series Chess Game: pewter pieces, Starfleet vs. Federation foes; \$944
The Next Generation 3-D Chess Game: sterling silver and 24k gold-plated abstract chess pieces; \$195
The Next Generation Chess Game: hand-painted pewter pieces (each mounted on a crystal ball), Starfleet vs. Federation foes; \$1,200

Star Trek: Armada Star Trek: Insurrection Voyager: Elite Force

Activision, 3100 Ocean Park Blvd., Santa Monica CA 90405
<www.activision.com>
Star Trek: Armada: real-time 3-D

strategy game; price varies
Star Trek: Insurrection: action/adventure game; price varies
Voyager: Elite Force: first-person shooter game; price varies

Star Trek Customizable Card Game

Decipher Inc., 235 Granby Street, Norfolk VA 23510-1813
<www.decipher.com>
Recommended starting point: *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* expansion set with ready-to-play 60-card starter deck and rules booklet; \$9.95

Star Trek: Deep Space Nine Roleplaying Game Star Trek: The Next Generation Roleplaying Game

Last Unicorn Games, Inc., 9520 Jefferson Blvd., Suite C, Culver City CA 90232-2918
<www.lastunicorngames.com>
Hardcover 288- to 312-page full-color books; \$35

Star Trek: The Next Generation Collectible Dice Game

Five Rings Publishing Group, P.O. Box 707, Renton WA 98057-0707
<www.frbg.com/startrek>
Starter set contains a ship, 25 dice, ship Bridge/Control Panel, shield and icon chart, and 24-page Basic Training book; \$14.95.

*In science as in life, what you find is in direct proportion
to how hard you're willing to look.*

Othernness

BY PHILLIP C. JENNINGS

YOWE FLUTTERED POLITELY to let the security guard know he was here. The guard tapped him with inordinately long tertiaries. "Visitor? Purpose?"

"Project Outbound," Yowe said.

"Oh, yes. The new guy. Just a moment." The guard shifted his bulk to concentrate on the drumming of his message. Presumably he was contacting Professor Shehao up on the heights of Great Smoky. After a time he spoke again. "The elevator is this way. Have you been to the Citadel before?"

"No," Yowe said.

"I'll play the orientation scroll. Have a pleasant ride."

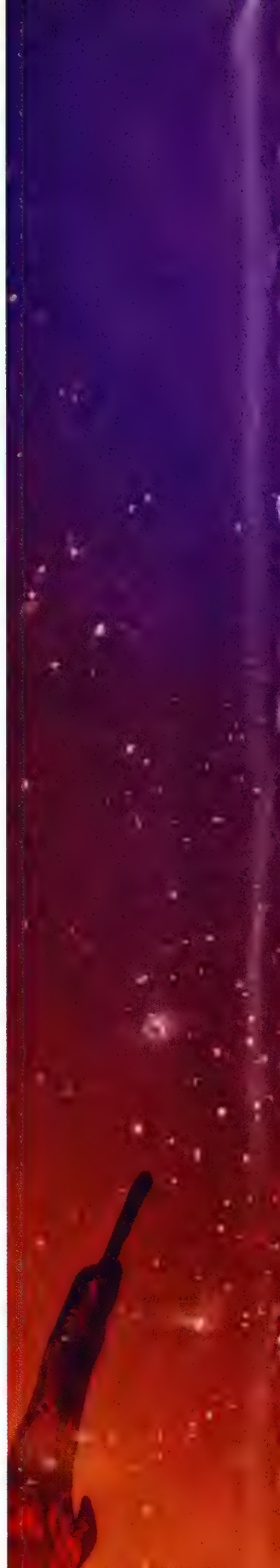
Yowe followed the wave of the guard's tertiaries into the elevator, which had the usual small-room feel. For an elevator, though, it was large—no need to retract into cocoon-posture. The smell was rich and pastoral. Food! Food at an altitude so high—!

As the elevator gained speed, the orientation scroll explained how high: twenty-eight *eye* above the plateau, itself a lofty spot in the world's crust. "In the days of the God-Queen, our ancestors used the advantage of height to glide over our enemies and drop on them. Every effort was made to 'grow' the vent-chimney to ever greater altitude, with admirable success. Great Smoky Citadel continued to serve as a military facility until the discovery of powered swimming, at which time it was retired to become a national monument—and a research facility.

"As we rise, the temperature will fall to barely tolerable levels. Water pressure will decline as well, a source of discomfort to many who are not prepared. Of course, the Citadel is warmed by the vent, an oasis of heat at an altitude of terrible cold. Our visitors find that with time they adjust to the pressure, but if discomfort continues, we advise a prompt descent."

After a splice-pause, the scroll played on. "The Citadel is used by oceanists as a launching point for upward probes. The vacuum-balloons of Project Outbound have reached altitudes of ninety *eye* beyond the heights of Great Smoky, discovering temperatures and pressures so low as to make us wonder—what are the minimums? Can we possibly reach Zero? Powerful currents flow at these dead altitudes, with nothing to impede them, yet there is turbulence as well. What powers the oceanic flow?"

ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHAN MARTINIERE





To Yowe's disappointment, the elevator was a closed box. Of course it would be, to retain the paltry heat of the water around him. He'd have to wait until the end of the ride to discover the presence or absence of optical phenomena.

Professor Shehao was waiting for him at the end of his long ascent. "Hello. Welcome. Ah, the scroll. I'll just push 'Rewind.' We get tourists, don't you know. And you're Master Yowe from Escarpment Academy, our expert in optics. Well, there's plenty of room in the barracks. Come this way, *carefully*. We're on an old launch-gantry. It's a long fall, so hold onto the railings. Yes, good. Stairs ahead."

Yowe reached the stairs. "Glad to be here, Professor. It's an honor." As he turned, he felt a descending wash of warmth and turbulence from Great Smoky's vent. They were in the open, and he craned hopefully, extending his eyestalks. Light? Was there any chance of a few weak glows shining through murky distances of thirty, forty, fifty *iy*e? The red glow of other smokers?

Yowe saw nothing. Professor Shehao continued to chat as they approached the Citadel's main buildings. "We have to cultivate tourists, so our facilities are pleasant, and the food—well, our food is famous. If you're not careful, you'll be slated for an early molt."

Yowe reached into his sack and gave the professor a visitor-gift of Hoya unguent. "I hope I'll be happy here."

"Optics," the professor said, tucking away his little present. "Now that's an odd one. But you've got funding. We're always in favor of funded research. It doesn't seem fair that we've got to pay room and board up here, since it's a national monument. But we do, and it's expensive."

"Your work is an inspiration," Yowe said. "I always study it with excitement."

"If there were more like you, I wouldn't worry so much," Shehao said, rolling the barracks door out of the way. "Can you imagine? Some people! If they had true faith in the God-Queen, they wouldn't feel threatened by science. But they say that what we're doing is useless—the truth is already known by scriptural revelation."

"I've got a theologian on my review committee," Yowe said. "I hope that helps. I'd just as soon avoid becoming a target for religious fanatics."

"Ha. Tell me about it! You know what they say? Either we're out to prove what's obvious already, in which case our work is useless, or else we're spending tax money to insinuate doubts and foment atheism." Professor Shehao came to what was apparently Yowe's new room and pulled aside to let him enter.

Yowe shed a few items of luggage. "Thanks."

"Are you hungry?" Professor Shehao asked.

"Famished."

"Let's take a meal. You'll be amazed at the size of our worms. Frightening, almost!"

The professor led the way from the barracks toward the feeding-thicket, although anyone would have been able to smell the direction. They climbed into the glow of heat and light, into the movement of billowing

Let's
take a meal.
You'll be amazed
at the size of our
worms.

currents and the roar of the God-Queen's voice. A message-pylon marked the edge of the thicket, a little piece of ostentatious piety:

"Oh, Inward Source, warm heart of life that nourishes wherever you reach, nourish us now. You glow in scripture and revelation, you refine our dross as you draw us in. Your absence is dark, cold death. Commingled in death, we worship you. Rejecting death, we serve you. You are our deepest truth."

A spectacularly appointed feeding-woman led the two of them to a good spot and selected a worm for them. Yowe admired the coordination of her limbs and the way her carapace glowed in the warm light. She left again, and Shehao and Yowe fell to feasting.

After a time, Shehao settled back. "Life is good! You know, of course, what I expect to find. I can predict the distances involved. After an ascent of a hundred twenty to a hundred fifty *iy*e, the temperature drops to the point that water undergoes a phase-transition. It becomes—well, hard. A substance like glassy rock. We've produced the stuff in labs. It's painful to the touch."

"Rock," Yowe repeated.

"An outward wall of rock, but this glass-rock is *lighter* than water! It's a sort of low-pressure solid. Presumably, if we could probe the rock, we'd find that it continues to get colder and less pressured with upward distance. How far does it go? Infinitely far? If so, then water in the liquid state is an anomaly in the universe."

"It's weird to think about," Yowe said.

"Or perhaps there's another phase-transition. For now, all we can do is speculate. We'll be dead before the technology exists to find out one way or the other."

Yowe felt it was his turn to speak. "My work is based on the idea that the upward ocean is transparent, being totally dead and far above the smokes and blooms of life. A light source at high altitude would radiate without hindrance."

"Yes?" Professor Shehao said encouragingly.

Yowe continued: "Well, everything is curved. The whole world is a ball, and the ocean sheaths it, and even your hypothetical outward rock must follow that curvature. Sphere upon sphere upon sphere! So it stands to reason that at the greatest possible scale of measurement, light is curved too! If we flash a light at ninety *iy*e, the glow will circle around the ocean and come back to us! That would be something to see."

"Is this the theologically correct theory of light?" Shehao asked.

"That it follows the great curve? Yes, indeed," Yowe said.

"So what happens if you find out otherwise? What if light shines in a straight line—as it seems to do in our limited experience?"

Yowe shrugged. "Optics is a young science. The word means nothing to most people. I suppose there'll be a quiet adjustment of our religious concepts. But I for one will be disappointed." He shifted his limbs in a sort of fidget and spoke again. "We may find that high-altitude water is not very transparent anyhow."

The amount of scatter will tell us that. Flash, bright light; flash, vague glow; or flash, total darkness. One of those three things will happen."

After the meal, Professor Shehao offered to show Yowe his latest balloon, up on the highest launch-gantry. Yowe made the climb and was impressed by its size. "We could dispense with instrumentation and ride up ourselves," he said.

"I've gotten volunteers. They don't understand the effect of severe cold on the nervous system. They think that after a molt, when their carapaces are still soft, they'd be able to adapt to ultralow pressures. But, you see, *this* balloon is going all the way. If we were to test the possibilities of live ascent, we'd want to do it in careful increments." Shehao paused. "Speaking of instrumentation . . ."

"My gear is simple. A chemical flare, and a camera. Both have been tested under probable conditions," Yowe said. "I plan to use your horizontal stabilizers as cowlings to suppress backscatter. The camera is set to snap after the flare is ignited. They'll be mounted on opposite sides of the gondola."

"Good. You can mount them late in the preparation sequence, shall we say stage twenty-two? We're at stage seven now."

"Where do you announce the stages?" Yowe asked.

"At the communications center. Journalists will start to accumulate around stage twenty, and maybe we'll get a politician or two. For them, the point of all this is publicity."

Yowe extended his tertiaries. "What have we got in the gondola so far?"

"Basic sensors. Here, touch carefully. This box is a seismograph. Once we're wedged up against that high rock shell—"

"Water-rock," Yowe said, with a little awe in his voice.

Shehao continued. "Once we're wedged, fixed tightly perhaps, not at the sway of currents, this seismograph will measure tremors in that rock-stuff."

"Tremors in solidified water? From what?"

"We don't know," Shehao said. "Our purpose is to collect data, whether we can explain it or not."

"Collection, and then descent again," Yowe said.

Shehao nodded. "All this work for a single interval of time, exploring the unknown. Well, Master Yowe, it was pleasant to meet you. The God-Queen keep you in good appetite. Remember, be ready at stage twenty-two."

After Professor Shehao left, Yowe made a circuit of the Citadel, on three quests at the same time. He found the empty communications center, and on a promontory not far distant, he moved into a current of cold water clear enough to give a view. A rare thing this was, a *visual* sense of space far below, red smokers in a zigzag line in a rift along the plateau! The untrained mind might not understand this use of light across great distances. For the untrained, the visual spectrum consisted of red, and the colors of reflected and attenuated red: orange and brown. The only other word in their optical vocabulary was *bright*, which meant blinding discomfort. Yowe's work at Escarpment Academy had revealed the existence of other colors, colors without names, colors almost of an anti-red nature, colors only visible in pure flare-light. If he were superstitious, he might call them ungodly colors, because of the way they changed everything and brought

to mind new realities, not under the familiar ruddy power of the God-Queen.

Those colors might make his fortune someday, if the academy succeeded in filing for patent rights. Yowe imagined "light shows" on an entertainment circuit, perhaps in conjunction with other acts of suitably uplifting quality. All this might be possible, if the theological climate permitted. Anything innovative had to be done with care.

Yowe's third quest was to find the feeding-woman he'd encountered earlier and ease himself upon her to release the tensions of travel. He imagined the twining of their limbs, that exquisite coordination. Leaving the cold promontory, he followed his senses toward billowing warmth, but she was gone, and her odor had dissipated. Yowe circled and then went back to the barracks. He took out a pack of cubes, played a cube-game, and let his mind drift off to sleep.

When he woke again he went to breakfast and signaled his intentions to the feeding-woman, using the kind of gestures a female might understand. She led him off for an interval, a *brisk* interval, and then went back to her work, leaving Yowe to wonder whether the high ratio of males to females in the Citadel left her feeling more than jaded. If only she could talk, she might tell him. She might explain her likes and dislikes. What an imaginative fellow he was, to think of the possibility of talking women! A hundred lifetimes ago there'd been one, if scripture was to be believed—surely scripture was based on *something*—but She was it, history's great miracle.

Yowe went back to his barracks, and took inventory of his equipment. He visited the communications center, but it was still empty. A placard at the door announced stage nine. Later the number advanced to ten. He returned to his room and disassembled his camera and put it together again.

Yowe went to the feeding thicket for another meal and encountered watercraft technicians, talking of oceanic currents and recovery techniques. A line would trail from the descending balloon gondola, and powered craft would launch from the Citadel to snare it and bring it in.

A thermal expert spoke of Great Smoky itself: "It's already had a long span of life. Vents die suddenly. Or perhaps a quake will topple this whole chimney. We live in a dangerous and temporary environment. A sideways eruption halfway down could destroy the elevator."

One of the others nodded at Yowe. "Don't mind him; he enjoys doom and gloom. He finds a meal ill spent if he can't come up with a morbid scenario. The more deaths, the better."

Yowe fluttered back to show amusement. "Great Smoky has grown without disaster since the beginning of history. The odds are good it'll last a few more swirls of time."

"Long enough, eh? Long enough."

Yowe retired to his room at stage twelve. When he woke it was stage fifteen. Stage seventeen took inordinately long and involved work

We
live in a
dangerous and
temporary
environment

on the gondola's stabilizers: Yowe went to check the situation. At stage twenty, Professor Shehao requested information on the chemicals in Yowe's flares. Would they generate heat as well as light? How much?

Yowe answered, and a cluster of scientists debated. They came to a compromise, and the assembly work continued. Yowe dragged wearily to the communications center. A pair of reporters played a game of cubes in the corner. When the game was over, they asked questions and scribbled Yowe's answers. Other scientists, wise in the ways of the media, had provided packets of information, glossy to the touch. As new reporters came in, they circled the walls and collected these packets, and then huddled to complain about the long, cold elevator ride, or the low water pressure.

At last the work reached stage twenty-two, and Yowe carried his equipment to the launch site, where clamps held the gondola firmly in place below the upward-straining balloon. Professor Shehao and his aides came and inspected the trigger mechanism that connected the camera to the flare-housing. Other experiments used trigger devices—awkward movements near the gondola might result in a dozen premature events, and Yowe worked very carefully indeed not to set them off. The job took a long time. Afterward Yowe went to the feeding-thicket, but he was too nervous to eat or appreciate the nervous humor of others around him.

For consolation he went out to the promontory, to stare across the high cold distances. Smokers. Rifts. Was the world geologically *more* active now than in the prehistoric past? *Less*? Was there any way to tell? How much past *was* there? All these questions were debated on the basis of too little information. It was a scandal, really, and the devotees of the God-Queen were scandalized that anyone mistrusted Her eternal reliability.

Yowe was amazed at his thoughts, which were inspired by the grandeur of his view. It was cold here, though. After a time the chill numbed the ideas out of his brain and forced him to return to his barracks-room, where he managed to rest.

He woke and breakfasted. At the communications center a podium had been set up, with a sign in front: stage twenty-nine. The balloon was nearly ready to launch. The time had come for speeches. Unfortunately, Consul Owsy was in molt and couldn't come, but Vice-Consul Eische was in his usual form, massively earnest, and a little insecure on the principles of vacuum ascent.

The great moment came, and Professor Shehao was there to pull the lever that opened the clamps and freed the balloon. Yowe could feel the suck of waters as it rose upward at great speed. From now on the job was to wait, although events had been scheduled to amuse the reporters.

Yowe felt ill from excitement. Spiritually he was riding that balloon through the high clear ocean, already beyond any possible swimming altitude. He went to the promontory and craned his eyestalks, but of course there was nothing to look at but overarching blackness. There'd be nothing to behold until his flare ignited and flashed, and then he'd see a light across the distance—or maybe not. It depended on the orientation of the cowl and on the water itself. The more glow,

the less transparency.

Professor Shehao moved to his side. "This is the only place uncomfortable enough not to be crowded," the great man said. "I'm exhausted. I haven't napped since stage eleven."

"I come here for the view," Yowe said.

"My sense of sight is nothing special. Do you see anything?"

"I do," Yowe assured him. "And soon, maybe, we'll see the balloon through ninety *eye* of water."

"Ah yes. The pressure-trigger. A major flash of light? We should have made something of it to the reporters."

"I told a couple of them, but I didn't have impressive handouts. I'm new at this business of publicity—There! Did you see it?"

"Yes!"

The flare faded, and Yowe treasured the afterimage. "It means there'll be backscatter light in the picture. That color? It's not the flare. The flare was set to be purely bright. It's the color of ocean across this enormous distance. The ocean isn't entirely transparent after all."

"Such a weird color," Shehao said. "There aren't words for it. A color that saps the redness out of red."

"The ocean has its own color," Yowe said. He was repeating himself, but the fact was important enough to repeat. "That's the name we should call it. 'Oceanic.'"

The color of water. We've only lived in water since the dawn of time, and now we know it has a color."

"Come with me," Professor Shehao said. "A few of us are having a special party in my rooms. If there's news, we'll hear it first."

Yowe and the professor reached the barracks, and Shehao was handed a message. He played his tertiaries over the bumps and ridges, and spoke in the crowded corridor: "The balloon has reached ultimate ascent, and is stable at a fixed altitude of one hundred thirty-three *eye*. We plan to keep it there for two services of time, and then breach the vacuum, letting water leak in to bring it down again. By the will of the God-Queen, we've had success."

"We've done it!" the professor's friends shouted.

The party began, and Professor Shehao was an active host the whole time, except when called aside to deal with messages.

In due course Shehao approved descent, and the balloon began traveling again. Watercraft pilots moved to the launch-platforms and catapulted to grapple its trailing tether. It would be awkward if they missed, awkward if the balloon was subjected to the whims of low-level currents—it might be thrust sideways into Great Smoky itself. Fortunately, everything went like clockwork. The gondola was brought in. The reporters were left to themselves as the scientists crowded in to retrieve and analyze results.

Yowe could almost predict what his camera would tell him: No dot of light in the center of the exposure. Backscatter around the edges. The ocean was not transparent enough to reveal the curvature of light, if indeed

Otherness.
It was an idea
not yet ready
to be made
public.

light was curved. Perhaps it wasn't. Straight light pointed to an unfamiliar *otherness* in the universe in the same way that colored water did.

The *otherness* was there. Professor Shehao's seismograph showed tremors in the solidified water at an altitude of one hundred thirty-three *iy*e. There were quakes above as there were quakes below, which suggested that the upward wall of water-rock was no thicker than the world's crust: no thicker than an *iy*e or two. Most eerily, audio detectors proved that the rock-wall *groaned* with its own deep music. Who would have expected that? The roar of the God-Queen had an answer, or at least an echo.

Otherness. It was an idea not yet ready to be made public, but in the times to come Yowe and Professor Shehao were invited onto the lecture circuit. They spoke of their findings, and always the questions came up: What was beyond the rock-wall? How did the unknown upward whatever-it-was relate to the God-Queen at the core of existence?

At one lecture toward the end of the tour, Professor Shehao surprised Yowe, who listened from the back of the hall. "A refined analysis of the data we possess indicates the possibility that the quakes we detected were caused by a focused event. I should say, perhaps an *impact*. One imagines things out there, swimming randomly, sometimes colliding."

"Swimming in *what*?" someone asked.

"I couldn't possibly answer," the professor said. "It would have to be nearly vacuum, if not vacuum itself."

"Things in vacuum—that's kind of a contradiction, isn't it?"

"Our whole world might be a thing in a vacuum," Professor Shehao said. Yowe expected nervous laughter, but instead the room began to buzz with talk. Such was the respect for the great professor that his audience took him completely seriously.

THE GAVEL BANGED as Senator Bauer opened the latest session of the Subcommittee on Astronautics. "Today we welcome Dr. Romney Bartok for his second day of testimony on deep-space probes. Senator Chaverford, you have five minutes for opening remarks."

Senator Chaverford leaned into his microphone. "Yesterday we heard proposals for a second Europa probe. As I understand it, this probe is to cross space the long way around, several hundred million miles to one of the moons of Jupiter, where it will land on rock-hard ice, in an environment twice as cold as the South Pole, and begin drilling through several miles—"

"Kilometers," Dr. Bartok interrupted.

"Well anyhow, a *couple* miles of this extra-hard icecap, in order to reach the *top* of an ocean maybe a hundred miles deep. All this effort and expense still puts us on the wrong side of those hundred miles, because any life, little worms and crabs and whatnot, lies on the *bottom* of that ocean! So now our probe has to drop a robot submarine built to endure pressures greater than anything on Earth. Need I wonder why the cost for this Europa 2 probe exceeds the national budget of Indonesia?"

"To make us feel better, Dr. Bartok tells us we don't know how to do most of these things, so all this money will be spent over many long years, figuring

out how to make things work in cold vacuum, or at incredible pressures. It's all *speculative*, see?"

"Science is speculative, Senator," Dr. Bartok said. "The first Europa probe set off an explosive charge. By creating seismic waves in the ice, it proved there *is* an ocean within reachable distance under the ice. There *is* geological activity at the bottom of that ocean. The conditions for life are fulfilled. Creatures at the bottom of Earth's oceans thrive under these same conditions. Senators, if the question is life in space, life on other worlds, this is the best way I know to find an answer. Is this life similar to life on Earth? Does it use DNA for genetic coding? Does it use the same amino acids? We have so much to learn, and our findings will teach us fundamental truths."

"Could this life *possibly* have done a *better* job of hiding itself away from us, permanently out of reach?" Senator Chaverford asked. "I don't think so. Doctor, you and your agency are going to have to rethink this. Come up with something a hundred times cheaper, and we'll listen to you again. We're not doing this. Europa 2 won't fly the way you describe it, not for all the stupid seaworms in all the oceans of God's Creation."

"What if they're *not* stupid?" Dr. Bartok said, but his voice was subdued in defeat.

"Eh? Smart worms? Little green men? Talking crabs, maybe?"

The room broke out in laughter, until Senator Bauer gavelled for silence. "Dr. Bartok, Europa 1 will occupy a lonely place in the history of space exploration, as wonderful as its findings were. Let's give this one up and move to the next item on your agenda." 🕯

about the author

Phil Jennings got stars for Sunday School attendance when he was a kid, but his interests in astronomy and geology led him astray.

Phil started writing science fiction in 1983 and got published in 1986. By the early nineties he was probably the last person in history to live on a commercial short-story writer's income of \$9,000, much of which came from AMAZING Stories.

It wasn't a life of luxury, but he made it work. He stretched those dollars to put money down on a \$14,900 house, which he proceeded to gut and rebuild. Maybe someday he'll give tours.



about the illustrator

Stephan Martinieri's talent and versatility have brought him acclaim as an illustrator, designer, and film director. He has done illustrations for the Where's Waldo syndicated comic strip; he directed the award-winning animated special Madeline; and his conceptual design work can be seen in the Star Trek: The Experience motion ride as well as the films The Fifth Element and Virus.

Martinieri's most recent contribution to these pages can be found in issue 595, "Digital Hearts and Minds."



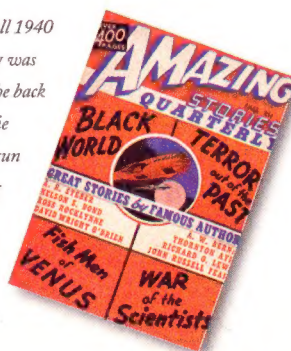


The Ultimate Heat Wave

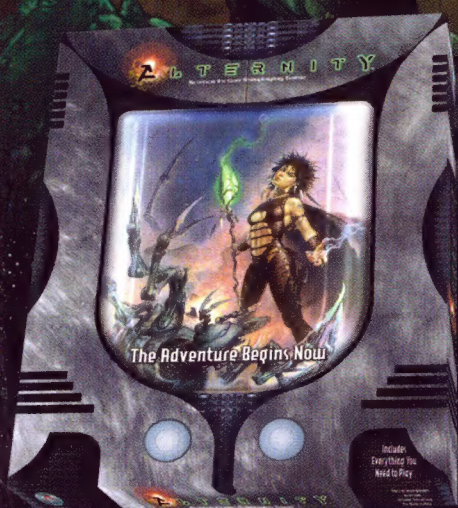
On the back cover of the Fall 1940 *AMAZING Stories Quarterly* issue, readers had the pleasure of seeing what would happen “if the sun ran amok.” They also had the pleasure of reading about ants insisting on their right to vote, a little twerp who issued treble-voiced warnings of disaster (no one listened, of course), a continent’s entire population that “froze in their tracks,” and a man who had to take on both fish men and Earth men in order to clear his name on the Venus Sea Bottom.



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